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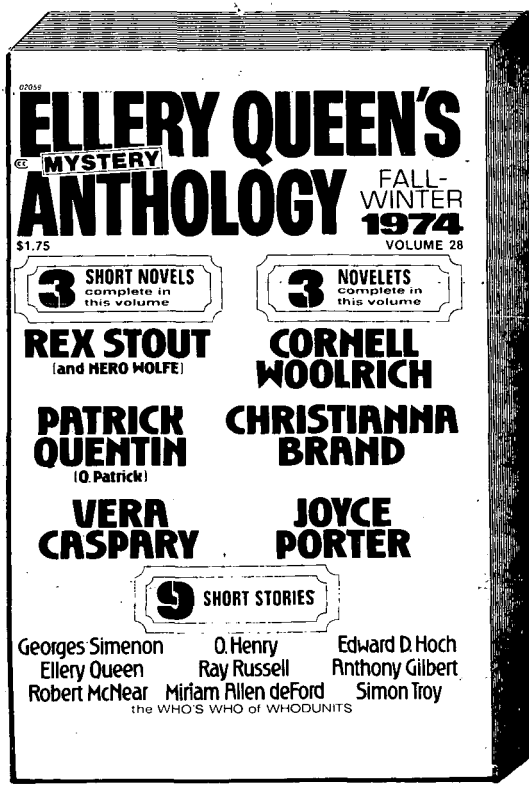

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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S
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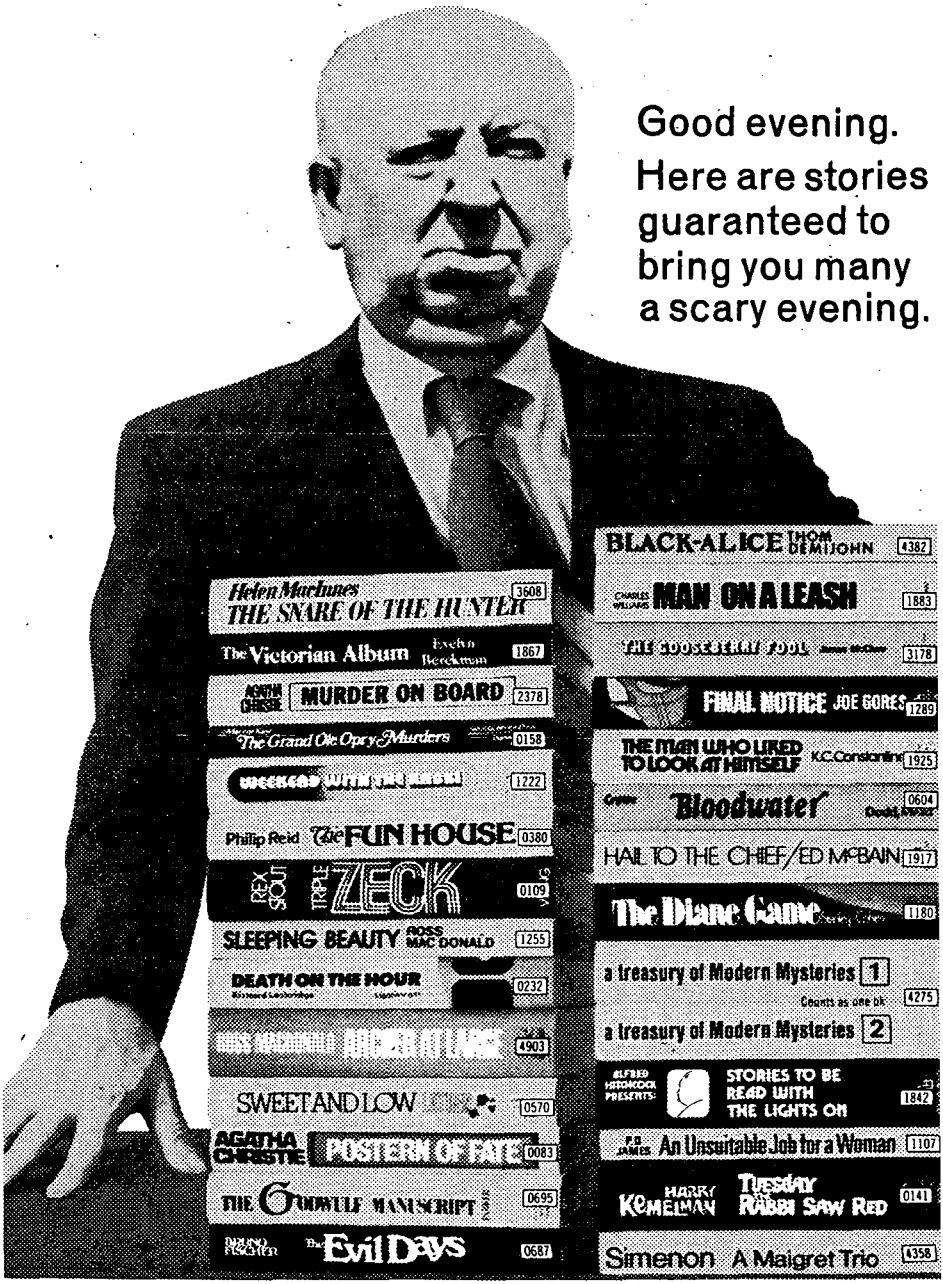
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a *NEW* Lollipop Cop story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

How would you like to win a bingo game any time you wanted to? The kindergarten teacher, Helen Ramset, seemed to be able to do just that. Her pupils and their parents called her a witch. Father Reagen seemed convinced she was. As for Helen Ramset herself, she did not claim to have any powers of witchcraft. She said it was the power of mind over matter, the ability of the mind to control the movement of inanimate objects—in a word, psychokinesis. But Paul Tower, the Lollipop Cop, was a natural-born skeptic . . .

THE KINDERGARTEN WITCH

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Paul Tower, who had become increasingly resigned to his "temporary" duties as the police department's Lollipop Cop, was loading up his pockets with the usual supply of candy for the kids when he was called into Lieutenant Gavin's office.

"How's it going, Tower?" the lieutenant asked. "Caught us any more murderers?"

"No, sir. I've just been doing my job, talking to the kids."

"You get too good at catching criminals and the Commissioner will want you in the plainclothes division."

"That case was pretty much luck," Paul said. "It won't happen again right away."

Gavin glanced at the schedule before him on the cluttered desk. "You're due at St. Stephen's today, right?"

"Yes, sir. I've been visiting the Catholic elementary schools this week before I start again on the public ones. St. Stephen's is my first stop this morning."

"We've got a report here—funny sort of a thing. You might just keep your eyes open while you're out there."

"What sort of report?" Paul Tower asked.

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"Well, you know these Catholic schools have to hire lots of lay teachers now. There just aren't enough nuns to go around. St. Stephen's has a kindergarten teacher named Helen Ramset. Some of the parents think she's a witch."

"A kindergarten witch? Not likely."

"Of course it's not likely! And I'm sure I'm not sending a man out to investigate such a story. But Father Reagen called and I told him I'd have our witch expert look into it."

"Who's our witch expert?"

"You, Tower. It's a job for the Lollipop Cop if ever there was one!"

St. Stephen's was an old brick building on the north side of the city, squatting at the center of a blacktop parking lot and proclaiming to all the message: *Bingo Every Sunday Nite!* The fact that the bingo sign was larger than the name of the school didn't strike Paul Tower as odd. During these past months he'd learned a great deal about the financial plight of nonpublic schools and their sometimes desperate struggle for survival. The few hundred dollars brought in by a weekly bingo game in the school hall could spell the difference between solvency and bankruptcy.

The little children welcomed the Lollipop Cop with all the gusto their elders might reserve for a famous rock group. He gave his little public-relations speech, about the policeman being their friend, and then passed out his familiar lollipops. He'd done it all many times before in the months since the accident and his reassignment to temporary duty. Perhaps it was the tragic death of his own wife and child that brought him closer to these children, made him fit so well into a role usually reserved for a fat and balding cop almost ready to retire.

Paul Tower was neither fat nor bald, and as he spoke to the children his eyes often wandered above their heads to the bright young teachers in their pert miniskirts. That was how he first noticed Helen Ramset, the kindergarten witch.

She had long black hair, as befits a witch, but her rounded, vaguely Oriental features seemed so open and friendly that he could not imagine her engaged in anything sinister. After his talk, while the tiny tots clustered around, he managed to work his way over to her. "This your class?" he asked.

"Part of them. We have three kindergartens here at St. Stephen's. Though we might

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have to eliminate them next year if the money runs out."

"I'm Paul Tower."

Her smile widened. "I know."

"Well, of course you know. I just meant—"

"Helen Ramset. Pleased to meet you."

He wanted to talk to her further, but already she was rounding up her charges and heading them back to the upstairs classroom. He decided to talk to Father Reagen instead.

The pastor of St. Stephen's was a middle-aged man with an athletic build and a ready smile. Paul found him in the rectory, typing up a column for the parish bulletin. "You would be the Lollipop Cop," he said with just a touch of Irish brogue. "It's a fine program you've got for the kiddies."

"Thank you," Paul acknowledged. "The lieutenant said you've been having trouble with a teacher—Miss Ramset in the kindergarten?"

"And he sent you to investigate?" The priest chuckled at the thought.

"What makes you think she's a witch, Father?"

"Why, she admits it! Oh, she has a fancy name for it, but I know witchcraft when I see it. She's bewitching our Sunday-night bingo games."

The idea was so ludicrous that Paul nearly laughed out loud. "You can't be serious?"

"She wins at least two or three games every week, and always the big prizes. The parents are furious. They're after me to fire her, but I can't do that as long as she does her job with the children."

"This doesn't sound like a case for the police."

"Could you at least come Sunday evening and see it for yourself?"

Paul hesitated. Sunday was his day off and he'd planned to spend it with Angie Dean, the school nurse he'd been dating for some weeks. But Father Reagen was a friend of the lieutenant, and the idea of bewitched bingo games was a hard one to resist.

"I'll be there," he told the priest.

Angie Dean came along reluctantly. A date at the church bingo game was not her idea of a night on the town. "Last night it was a stag party and tonight you want to take me to a bingo game!"

"It's sort of work," he confided.

"Are you getting paid for it?"

"Cops and nurses are never off duty," he replied, linking their professions. That quieted her for a time.

The school hall was crowded again, but the children Paul

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had spoken to on Friday were mainly replaced by their mothers and older sisters. Paul watched them enter, saw each one pay her money and accept a bingo board of two or three cards from a gruff-voiced man at the door who looked like a church usher. When Helen Ramset entered the man said, "Here's your lucky card, Miss Ramset."

She thanked him and was moving toward her chair when Paul intercepted her. "They all know you here," he said.

"Oh—hello again! That's just Charlie, the bingo caller. He's a flirt, forgets he's a married man sometimes. What brings you here? I didn't realize the Lollipop Cop was a bingo enthusiast."

"I'm not, usually," he admitted. "Father Reagen asked me to stop by."

"Probably because of me." She seated herself at one of the long tables. "Did he tell you I work magic charms on those numbered balls?" She gestured toward the stage where the gruff-voiced Charlie had now taken a seat and turned on the glass-sided bingo blower, tossing and tumbling the numbered ping-pong balls on a stream of air.

"Not exactly," Paul hedged. "Do you?"

She smiled her secret smile. "Are you familiar with psychokinesis? The ability of the mind to control the movement of inanimate objects?"

"I've heard the term," he admitted.

"Then you're one up on Father Reagen. It's usually done with dice, but I've discovered that controlling the movement of a ping-pong ball on a column of air is much easier."

"You mean you cheat at bingo?"

"Not cheat! I sit here with my boards and when I have four numbers across or down I concentrate on the ball bearing the number I need for bingo. I use will power to bring it off its column of air and down that little chute. Of course I don't always win. Often by the time I have four numbers someone else has bingo. And there are always a couple of balls in the chute waiting to be called, so sometimes another person beats me to it. But I have a few winning games every Sunday."

"I'd like to see you do it," he said.

"You will, before the night is over."

He left her and drifted over to Father Reagen, who was chatting with a husky parishioner he introduced as Roy Collins. "Roy's one of the organizers of these bingo

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games. I don't know what we'd do without him."

"My sons are around somewhere," Collins said, acknowledging the introduction. "I'd like you to meet them."

"Roy and the Men's Club paid for a little kitchen backstage," the pastor went on. "Come on, I'll show you."

Paul was properly appreciative of the kitchen, and even used the icepick from a drawer to chop some slivers of ice for a couple of orange drinks. When he returned to Angie with the refreshments, the first game was well under way.

"B-14," the caller rasped into the microphone. "B-14!"

"I've got it," Angie said.

"Good for you. Here's something cool to drink."

"O-68. O-68."

After some more numbers had been called, a woman near the front shouted, "Bingo!" There were groans from the others.

When the winner had been confirmed, the players dumped the plastic markers from their boards and prepared for the next game. Paul saw Father Reagen talking with two boys, one quite young and the other a long-haired teenager. The priest motioned him over.

"I'll be right back," he told Angie.

"Again?"

"Business."

Father Reagen smiled as he approached. "These are Roy's sons. He wanted you to meet them." He pushed the shy younger one forward. "This is Tommy Collins. He was out sick Friday and missed seeing you."

Paul shook the boy's hand and went through the familiar routine, pulling back his jacket to reveal the off-duty pistol he always carried on his belt. The older youth—the long-haired teenager—hovered in the background. When the priest finally introduced him as Hank Collins, he told his kid brother, "Come on. We gotta go home."

"He's not bothering me," Paul assured the older boy.

Hank Collins tossed his head, brushing the hair from his eyes. It was clear he belonged to a generation more willing to view Paul Tower as a fascist pig than as a lollipop cop. "But you're bothering him, cop. Come on, Tommy." He led the small boy away.

"Do you have many of those?" Paul asked the priest.

"More than we need. But he's coming along. Last year he had some trouble with the law—stealing tires—but the judge gave him a break and he's been pretty good ever since. His father tries to keep him in line."

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The familiar groan went up from the crowd as another woman shouted *Bingo*! The school hall was gradually taking on the appearance of a smoky men's poker club. Between games Father Reagen took him up to the stage and introduced him to the gruff-voiced caller. "This is Charles O'Neill. Don't know what we'd do without him."

The youngish man shook hands with Paul. "You might have to find out. I doubt if my voice will go another twenty games tonight." He hopped off the stage and disappeared into the kitchen through the swinging door.

"Your place is so well equipped," Paul observed. "Would there be a bit of Irish whiskey in the kitchen for O'Neill's throat, Father?"

The priest chuckled. "The Men's Club stocks the kitchen. I don't know half of what they hide in there." When O'Neill returned, he asked, "Charles, do you want Roy or somebody to take over for a few games?"

"The throat's a little better now, Father. Let me try this next one before I take a break."

On the way back to his chair Paul stopped to speak to Helen Ramset again, and when he returned to Angie she asked, "That was business?"

"As a matter of fact, it was. She's a kindergarten teacher here."

"I-29," Charles O'Neill rasped into the microphone. His hoarseness was no better.

Paul focused his gaze on Helen Ramset. After a dozen numbers had been called her eyes seemed to glaze and she seemed deep in thought. He knew he was seeing her attempt at psychokinesis and he wondered if it would work. Father Reagen saw it too, and moved over to stand directly behind the girl.

The next number O'Neill called was G-55, and Helen's eyes came clear. "Bingo!" she called out.

"I saw it but I don't believe it," Paul muttered.

"What?" Angie asked.

"Nothing. Excuse me again."

"I thought we came here to play bingo!"

"I'll be back."

The prize in this game was $100, and Helen collected it from O'Neill with a broad grin. He whispered something to her but she shook her head, still smiling. A murmur of talk ran through the hall. Obviously her winning was a familiar and unwelcome sight to the regular players. O'Neill disappeared again into the kitchen.

When he saw her heading for the outside door Paul was quick to follow. He intercepted her

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outside, feeling the cool night breeze against his face. "Quitting so soon? I'd like to see you do it again."

"I could," she insisted. "I've had as many as three winners in a single night. But when the women start grumbling and Father Reagen heads my way, I know that's enough for the night. If I pressed my skill there could be trouble."

"I'd call the whole thing a coincidence myself."

"That's because you saw it happen only once," she replied with a grin. "But I assure you it's the power of the mind—not witchcraft."

He wanted to stay with her, to walk her home, but Angie was still waiting inside. "Let's talk about it some more," he suggested.

"Glad to, any time."

She left him and hurried off down the street. He watched to see if she had a car but she seemed to be on foot, perhaps headed for a nearby apartment building. He was just reentering the school hall when he saw someone step from the shadows down the block and grab the teacher around the neck. It was a dark shape—a man, but unrecognizable from that distance. Helen uttered a choked cry.

Paul sprinted across the schoolyard, clearing a low fence as he reached for the gun on his belt. "Stop!" he shouted. "I'm a police officer!"

The man shoved Helen Ramset aside and took off running. "Stop or I'll shoot!" Paul commanded, and fired once into the air. He paused only long enough to see the streak of blood on Helen's neck as she got to her feet and then he took off after the running man.

There was still a half block between them when the man darted across the deserted street. Paul shouted at him again and took careful aim. As the man passed in front of a lighted automobile showroom, he fired. It was a long shot. He thought the man missed a step, but he kept on running, rounding the side of the building. By the time Paul reached the darkened car lot there was no sign of him.

He went back and checked in front of the windows, but found nothing. No blood, no bullet hole. He hurried back to where he'd left Helen and found her standing with her hand against a tree for support. "Are you all right?"

"I guess so," she said.

"I saw blood."

"He had a knife, but he only nicked me before you yelled."

"Did he get your purse?"

"Purse?" It seemed to be the first time she'd thought of it.

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She bent and groped in the grass and came up with it after a moment. "Here it is."

"He must have been after the money you won."

"I doubt that. The hundred-dollar and two-hundred-fifty-dollar prizes are paid by check. Only the small ones are paid in cash. Besides, no one followed me out of the hall, did they?"

He had to admit she was right. The assailant was already lying in wait when she started up the street. He began to speak but was interrupted by a police siren. Someone had heard the shots and reported them.

When the squad car came into view, Paul walked over to meet it, showing his identification. "A mugging. I chased him and fired two shots, but he got away."

They took Helen's name and address, expressing concern about the cut on her neck. "It's nothing," she insisted. "They have first-aid supplies back at school. I'll take care of it myself."

The squad-car cops went off to check the auto lot and Paul walked back to the school with her. "After you're fixed up I'll take you home," he insisted. "The streets aren't safe around here."

"Nothing like this ever happened to me before."

"There's always a first time."

Charles O'Neill was beginning a new game as they walked in. A girl at the door offered a board to Helen but she brushed it aside. "There's been some trouble," Paul told Angie. "Somebody mugged her. Keep playing and I'll be back later."

"You're going to leave me alone again?"

"It's business, Angie."

He followed Helen into the little kitchen area backstage. She'd opened a cabinet next to the sink and was applying salve to the red line on her neck.

"Let's see that," he said.

"It's nothing. He held the blade of the knife there, and it was sharp. I don't think he meant to harm me."

"Did you get any sort of look at him? Could you smell cologne or anything? I was too far away to see his face."

"You think muggers in this section of town get all fancied up before they go to work?" She covered the cut with two adhesive bandages, checked herself in the mirror, and said, "I suppose as long as I'm back here I might as well stay for another game."

"I wanted to take you home."

"You still can, but later." She was already heading back to the hall, and as she pushed open the swinging door they

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heard O'Neill's raspy voice.

"G-50. G-50."

Paul followed her reluctantly and took an empty chair next to her. Across the hall he could see Angie glaring at him. A couple of children came up to stare and whisper, and he knew they must be part of his Friday-session audience. Perhaps they were surprised to see him out of uniform, imagining—as he had imagined through his childhood—that policemen always wore their neat blue coats with the brass buttons and shiny badges.

"B-1. B-1."

Helen had begun covering the numbers on her board, though with the game already well along there was not much chance of her winning. Paul's eyes were on the stage, and suddenly he saw O'Neill raise his gaze from the white numbered balls. He seemed to be looking toward the rear of the hall, and there was an instant of something like terror written across his face.

Suddenly O'Neill got to his feet and motioned the alternate caller to take his place. Paul turned to follow the direction of his gaze, but he saw nothing. There were only the rows of lady bingo players and a few children and the long-haired son of Roy Collins.

Charles O'Neill disappeared through the swinging door to the kitchen area. Paul saw that Helen had been watching him too, and now she got to her feet. "Something's wrong. Did you see the look on his face?"

"He seemed frightened," Paul said.

The other caller had taken over, and after the second number someone in the rear shouted "Bingo!" to the accompaniment of the familiar groans. Paul glanced back again and noticed that young Hank Collins had left the hall.

Helen Ramset was following Charles O'Neill into the kitchen, and Paul decided to tag along. He saw the flash of her skirt disappear through the swinging door and pushed in after her. He heard her scream before the door was fully open, and felt it bump against her shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked, but now he could see what she saw.

Charles O'Neill was slumped against the counter by the refrigerator, and even as they watched with horror-stricken eyes he slid slowly to the floor. Someone had plunged an icepick deep into his right side.

It was an hour before the men from Homicide finished with their pictures and their questions. O'Neill had lived only about ten minutes after

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they found him—just long enough for the ambulance to arrive—and though they tried to get a statement from him before he died, they failed. O'Neill was conscious only long enough to make a vague gesture toward the rear door, and then he lapsed into a final slumber.

"How well did you know him?" Paul asked Helen Ramset as they waited to be questioned. "Why would anyone want to kill him?"

"I can't imagine. I only knew him from these bingo games, and seeing him around school. He had a child in one of the upper grades."

They went over their story with Lieutenant Gavin, who'd arrived on the scene to work with Homicide. Paul wondered if Father Reagen had requested his help on this too, as he'd requested help in dealing with the kindergarten witch.

"All right," Gavin said, taking Paul aside while one of the Homicide men questioned Helen. "What do you think about her? Could she have done it?"

"I don't see how," Paul said. It was a question he'd pondered during the past hour, and he was sure his answer was the right one. "Something scared O'Neill, made him leave that stage and hurry into the kitchen. It may have been a person who entered through the rear door, or it may have been something else that he saw."

"If it was a person, was there time for him to leave the hall, run around the side of the school, and come in by the rear kitchen door?"

"Just barely. He may have signaled O'Neill to meet him out there, I don't know. He'd still have to work awfully fast to enter the kitchen, stab O'Neill, and leave before we got there."

"And the girl?"

Paul shook his head. "She was out of my sight for about three seconds, no longer, while that door swung shut. Unless she hurled that icepick like a dagger—which is probably impossible—it couldn't be done." But somewhere in the back of his mind he was remembering the psychokinesis. Was it possible for a mind that controlled ping-pong balls to control an icepick as well?

They walked over to the rear door, which led to the darkened school playground. "If it wasn't the girl, then the killer had to come and go this way," Gavin said.

"O'Neill seemed to be indicating that before he died."

The lieutenant paused to examine a rack of carving knives next to the door. "Maybe he was indicating these knives."

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"But he wasn't killed with a knife. He was killed with an icepick, and that was over by the refrigerator. I remember using it earlier."

"Did anyone else follow him into the kitchen?"

Paul shook his head. "Not till Helen and I did."

Gavin glanced around the room. "Only two entrances. Either the girl did it somehow during those three seconds or the killer came from outside. I suppose outside is the more likely, but I'd better talk to her anyway."

While the lieutenant questioned Helen, Paul went back into the school hall. The place was nearly empty now, cleared quickly during the wildfire of panic that followed the stabbing of O'Neill. Only Father Reagen remained, looking tired, and Roy Collins. They talked in low voices as they gathered up the bingo cards and plastic markers.

"A terrible thing," Father Reagen said, seeing Paul approach. "Terrible for the poor man's family, and terrible for the parish. We've never had anything like this happen before."

Roy Collins nodded, the overhead lights lingering on his shiny bald head. "Now we've got to find a new caller and try to convince people it's safe to come here on a Sunday night. And what are we going to do about tonight's jackpot, Father? We had to end the games before we got to it."

"The man's soul is more important than a bingo jackpot."

"But he's dead now. What more can you do for him?"

"I was speaking of the murderer's soul," Father Reagen replied.

Paul Tower mounted the stage and sat down at the caller's board. There were 75 numbered holes in it, divided into five sections beneath the letters B-I-N-G-O. The numbered ping-pong balls fitted into each of the holes as they were called. At a low table next to the board the caller's assistant recorded the numbers on a yellow pad. Paul flipped on the switch of the bingo blower and watched the balls toss and tumble on their current of air. He started taking them casually from the chute and placing them in the proper holes.

That was when he noticed the little pencil marks next to certain of the holes. They were almost too faint to be seen, but they were there nevertheless. He rubbed his finger over one and it came away. Why had certain numbers been checked with a pencil, and who had done it? O'Neill? Or someone else?

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Roy Collins and Father Reagen continued to clear away the evening's litter, emptying ashtrays and folding chairs. Long-haired Hank Collins had reappeared from somewhere to join them, and Paul remembered seeing him at the back of the hall when Charles O'Neill had registered his sudden fright. The youth was quiet and sullen, going about his chair-folding task with something like contempt.

Paul pulled another ball from the little pocket at the bottom of the blower. It was G-50, and he noticed a smear of something dried on one side. Something brown, that could have been dried blood. He placed the ball carefully in its proper hole and stood up.

"It's late," Lieutenant Gavin said, coming out of the kitchen. "Do you want to take Miss Ramset home, Tower?"

"Have you finished with her, sir?"

"For now. We may need a further statement tomorrow. It seems likely that O'Neill came out here and surprised the same person who attacked her earlier. A neighborhood mugger and sneak thief."

"That doesn't seem likely to me," Paul said.

"Why not?"

"The man who attacked Helen Ramset was carrying a knife with a sharp blade. He would have used that on O'Neill instead of the icepick."

"Maybe not. Maybe he threw the knife away while you were chasing him."

Paul considered the possibility. But there was something else stirring in his mind. Something he could almost get a grip on.

"Lieutenant, could you get everyone together here in the hall? Helen Ramset and Father Reagen and Hank Collins and Roy Collins? I've got an idea."

"What sort of idea?"

"I think I know who killed him, but the why of it still isn't completely clear. I want to talk it out in front of them."

Gavin chuckled. "Like in those old Charlie Chan movies they show on TV? You gonna point to the guilty one?"

"Maybe."

Angie Dean came in from the back of the hall, walking purposefully. "Paul, I've been sitting in the car for an hour! How much longer will you be?"

"Last act, Angie. You might as well be in on it, too. Have a seat."

"I've been sitting all night!"

"This won't take long." He saw that one of the detectives had escorted Helen Ramset into the hall. She took a seat next to Hank Collins without looking at him.

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"What is all this?" Father Reagen asked. "Hardly the time for a bingo game!"

Paul moved away from the bingo blower but remained on the stage. "But it seems that the bingo game is the key to this killing—the bingo game and Helen Ramset's attempts to influence the call of the numbers by psychokinesis."

"Do you believe that?" Father Reagen asked.

"The important thing is that Helen believed it. She used the method and she won money, as we all know. Not a great deal of money, but enough. A hundred dollars tonight."

"I won money," Helen confirmed, "and that proves my psychokinesis worked."

But Paul was shaking his head. "No, it only proves the bingo game was fixed."

Roy Collins was on his feet, red-faced with anger. "What are you saying? The church runs an honest game here!"

Even Lieutenant Gavin spoke up. "Why would anybody want to fix a bingo game? The top prize is limited by law to $250, and she didn't even win that!"

"I'm sure she would have, though. He was just working up to it."

"He?"

Paul pointed to the bingo board. "I noticed some tiny pencil marks next to certain holes. I think you'll find they correspond to the numbers on one of the cards Helen was using tonight. You see, when Helen went into her psychokinesis trance, the caller could simply glance at his board and see which number she needed. The next ball out, whatever its number, was called wrong to make her a winner."

"How do you know that?" Helen objected.

"You told me yourself. You pointed out that there were usually balls waiting in this chute on the blower, and that your number couldn't come up at once. But in the game that you won, that's exactly what happened. As soon as you started to concentrate on G-55, that number was called next. So it couldn't be psychokinesis. And since your winning was such a common thing, I ruled out coincidence, too. That left only fraud."

"You mean," Father Reagen asked quietly, "that Charles O'Neill was cheating and calling the wrong numbers?"

"I mean exactly that."

"But who killed him?" Helen wanted to know. "If you think I made that icepick fly across the kitchen—"

"No, no. The answer is much simpler than that."

"Is the killer here?" Gavin asked.

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Paul Tower nodded. "The killer is here." In that moment it did seem like a Charlie Chan movie.

"Who?"

"I killed him," Paul said. "I killed Charles O'Neill."

They didn't understand him. They looked at each other and then at him, and still they didn't understand. This part wasn't like any movie.

"Don't you see?" Paul hurried on. "It was O'Neill who attacked Helen tonight. When I fired that shot I hit him in the side. It was a long shot, and at that distance the bullet didn't stop him immediately. I thought I saw him miss a step when I fired, but I couldn't find any blood. I should have realized the bullet hit him, though. I shot him in front of the big lighted windows of an auto dealer. If the bullet had missed him, it would have shattered the glass—or at least left an easily seen bullet hole. I saw nothing, because the bullet didn't hit the window—it hit the running man."

"And how do you know it was O'Neill?" the lieutenant asked.

"There was a look on his face when he stood up suddenly and left the stage. I thought it was surprise, and it was in a way—the surprise, the terror, sudden unbearable pain. He'd been walking around with that bullet in his side for a half hour but now it caught up with him."

"You're guessing."

"Not at all." Paul held up the white numbered ball. "There's a smear of blood on this, and it's G-50—one of the numbers O'Neill handled in the last game. He'd been pressing his hand against his wound, and he transferred the blood to this ball."

"But the icepick!"

"He had to get medical attention at once or he knew he might die. He could hardly admit to being shot or we'd know he was Helen's attacker. So he went into the kitchen, picked up the icepick, and plunged it into the bullet hole. He thought he had nothing to lose at that point. Doctors might treat the wound without realizing there was a bullet in it. Or the bullet might be lost in a body cavity. In any event, the chance of discovery through probing or x-rays at the hospital was one he had to take. There was no other choice except to admit everything. Of course it was a fatal decision. Either the icepick did further damage or drove the bullet deeper into his body. Whichever, it killed him."

"I can't believe it," Father Reagen murmured.

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"It's true enough. The use of the icepick itself was another clue, of course. As I've pointed out, the attacker of Miss Ramset would have had his knife, or even if he'd thrown it away he could have gotten a carving knife from the rack by the door. Instead he crossed the room to the counter and opened the drawer to get at the icepick. Why? There could only be one explanation—the slim shaft of the icepick would go into a wound already there, doing much less new damage than a wide-bladed carving knife. I suppose he might have gotten away with it, if the stunt hadn't killed him."

"You've answered it all except why," Helen said. "Why did he attack me with that knife? What was he after?"

"I think you can answer that better than I can. You told me he was a flirt, that he forgot sometimes he was a married man. Why do you think he fixed the games so you could win that money? Why do you think he encouraged your belief in the power of your mind? It was because he loved you, Helen. He said something when he handed you the check tonight—what was it?"

She blushed slightly. "He whispered I should wait and he'd drive me home."

"And you didn't wait. You started home alone, and this final rejection was more than he could stand. He left the stage, picked up a knife in the kitchen, and intercepted you down the block. I guess we'll never know just what he had in mind—simply to scare you, or to kill you."

She sat staring at the floor, and Father Reagen went to comfort her. Gavin came over and said, "That was pretty good, Tower. I'll have the coroner check for a bullet in that wound, but I think you're right. I think he'll find it."

Father Reagen came over to Paul. "You've done so much for us tonight. Could I ask one more favor? Could you take Miss Ramset home?"

"I'd be glad to take her home," Paul answered.

At his side Angie Dean tugged on his sleeve. "We'll *both* take her home, Father!"

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

"In my mind right now there are two compartments. In one I see Tony dancing with Barbara on our back lawn while his song fills the night. In the other . . ."

C'EST VOULU

by WILLIAM BANKIER

It has been a busy day. This morning I saved Tony Ferro's life. Then this afternoon I killed him. Or as good as.

Let me give you a little background. Up here in Montreal the French-speaking community has its own Hollywood going and Tony is one of its minor stars. The Radio-Canada Building on Dorchester Boulevard is one of the busiest television production centers in North America, the feature film business is booming, and the recording industry is a boisterous carnival of rock groups and singers you've never heard of, but who are as big in French Canada as the Beatles or the Stones.

Tony Ferro is part of this world. A French-speaking member of Montreal's large Italian population, he is a very talented writer of songs, both words and music. He also works as a commercial producer at one of the downtown advertising agencies which is where I met him when I was working full time as a copywriter.

I went free-lance a year ago when I landed a contract as head writer for a CBC soap opera, which permits me to work at home. Barbara and I still see Tony socially because we're neighbors, our houses facing each other across Champlain Avenue. And once in a while I help him with an English lyric.

The way it works is this. On a summer evening Tony will come drifting across the street, down the driveway, and into our backyard. I'm flaked out on the garden swing with a gin and tonic in my hand and a

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mystery book on my lap. Work all done. Barbara is in the kitchen, stacking dishes in the washer, singing to herself. We're both pretending we don't have a teen-aged daughter who hasn't been home in six months.

"Hello there, Ira," Tony says.

"Hello, George." When he starts pretending we're the Gershwins, I know Tony has a project for me.

"Got a minute to hear something?" He's carrying his portable Uher tape recorder.

"Sure thing."

"The tune came to me on the way to work the other day, so I taped it right away while I was stuck in traffic. Then I found time to put words to it and —well, here it is."

I have been watching Tony's black- and silver-thatched head bent over the buttons on the machine and now he looks up at me and brings the song on with a graceful spreading of one hand. Warm brown eyes, a very gentle smile.

Barbara hears the song and comes out of the house and across the lawn to join us. Tony meets her three steps from the swing, kisses her cheek, then dances a few steps with her there on the lawn. The song is a waltz and a very pretty one. My French is good enough for me to catch most of it —something about a world where the sun is golden and love is supreme. Vintage Ferro.

At my request he rewinds the tape and plays it again. We nod and sway to the rich sound of Tony's baritone, a voice good enough to take him down the road to a professional singing career many years ago. When it's over he says, "Would you care to write English lyrics for that one?"

"It would be a pleasure. If you can let me have a lead sheet."

"Just seem to have one with me." From his jacket pocket Tony takes a folded sheet of music manuscript with the melody and the French words on it.

"Is this the one that's going to make it big for us?" I ask.

Tony grins. "*C'est voulu*," he says. That's a French expression he uses meaning, "It's meant to happen."

Then we have a couple of drinks while the declining sun projects the shadows of the poplar trees across the lawn and Tony fills us in on what's been happening at the agency. Nothing has changed. The account supervisors don't like the commercials until the clients buy them. The copywriters believe the productions have destroyed their great ideas. Everything costs too much.

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Before Tony went home we played the tape again. It sounded even better in the dark with the crickets as counterpoint.

Barbara went inside and I sat there alone for a while, wondering what chance my English adaptation of Tony's song would have. Many of his songs have been recorded in French by good performers like Guerard and Reno and they sell well. But on the rare occasion when he manages to have an English track issued, it dies. Let's face it. North America listens to music from New York, Los Angeles, London, and Nashville.

Still, I cherished hopes. Tony's trip to Tokyo last year where he was runner-up in the International Song Festival was a good sign. One of these days he would break through with a song State-side. When that happened I wanted the lyric to be mine.

I tipped my glass to my lips and tasted a lot of water and not much gin. I threw the discouraged ice cubes onto the lawn and headed for the orange light of the kitchen. Barbara was at the table doing her shorthand homework; she plans to go back to work.

I made us some jasmine tea and we took our steaming mugs and walked through the silent house to the living room. We were both thinking the same thing. Barbara said it.

"Lonely old place without Karen."

"I wish I knew what to do."

"There isn't anything you can do."

The only thing I had done for my daughter lately was hurry down to Sears and rescue her from the security office. The store cops had grabbed her with an expensive transistor radio in her bag. They let her out in my custody because it was her first offense, but we both knew it was just the first time she'd been caught.

Karen refused to come home with me but she did take me around to her pad. It was a bleak room with a mattress on the floor and a dripping sink in the corner. We took turns squashing cockroaches.

"Are you on something now?"

"Daddy, don't ask me about that." Her face was washed out and gray, her eyes distant. One finger clawed constantly at the ragged cuticle around her thumb nail.

"That's why you ripped off the store. To pay for your habit."

"You don't understand."

"That's right. I'll never understand this."

At the door I took her hand. The fingers were cold and life-

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less. "Won't you come home and let us look after you?"

"It's too late for that." Then, as I walked away, she said it all. "Daddy, I just can't help it."

All of which brings me up to this morning when I went to the front door to see if there was any mail. Barbara was downtown at her business-school course and when I'm alone in the house, I wander around looking for things to do to avoid sitting down at the typewriter. One of these things is checking the slot for mail. It was eleven o'clock and no letters, time to accept the fact that I wasn't getting any.

I was about to head back to my desk when I glanced through the small window in the front door and saw Tony Ferro's car drive up to the garage beside his house across the street. He got out and I was struck by the despondent hang of his head. He set his brief case on the driveway, walked to the garage door, raised it, got back into his car, and drove into the garage. Then he climbed out of the car and closed the garage door. From the inside.

That was strange. But for a minute or two I didn't realize why. I just stood there staring at Tony Ferro's brief case standing all by itself on his asphalt driveway like a symbol in an impressionistic painting.

Then it struck me. There was no door from the garage into the house, so Tony must be sitting in there. I tried to remember if he had turned off the motor before he closed the door. It seemed to me the red parking lights had been on, and I had seen fumes coming from the exhaust pipe. Exhaust!

I opened my door and ran across the street. Yes, with my face close to the garage door I could hear the engine idling inside. I tried to raise the door but he had locked it from the inside.

"Tony!" No answer. "Tony!"

There were two small windows in the garage door. Looking around, I found a couple of stones in the rock garden beside the driveway and I used these to smash the windows. A heavy smell of carbon monoxide poured over me. Through the window I could see Tony's head against the neck rest, as though he were asleep. Only I knew he wasn't sleeping. He was dying.

The window was too small for me to crawl through and the door wouldn't budge. I ran across the street to my own house, opened the tool shed, and found a crowbar. I used this to smash the handle on the garage door and pry it up from the bottom.

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With the door half wrecked but open, I ran in, coughing, and turned off the ignition. Tony was out cold but still breathing. Beside him, the Uher tape recorder was running, the reel turning with a quiet whirr, and the microphone was lying on his lap.

I found a house key in Tony's pocket and used it to open the front door. When he was inside on the sofa, collar undone and breath coming more easily, I went back to see about that tape. I was curious. This was obviously a premeditated attempt at suicide. If I was going to deal with my friend when he came around, it would help to know what was bothering him.

In the garage I rewound the tape and put the machine on PLAY. Tony's voice sounded weary.

"I am taking the easy way out because I can't deal with these guys any longer. They will just drag me in deeper and deeper. The man is Angelo Valenti. He read about me last year when I was invited to the song festival in Tokyo. He and another man, Ross Cleveland, told me to bring back a package of drugs. I refused at first. But they threatened me. They also promised to help me sell my songs to big singers in the States. So I went along. Now they are after me again. They want me to go to Europe, pretend I'm seeing music publishers, and bring back another package . . ."

The voice on the tape was breaking up, becoming weaker. I turned up the volume.

". . . they are turning me into a runner for their operation. They will never let me go. Whoever finds this—"

The speech ended abruptly. Only an electronic hum remained. I rewound the tape, removed the spool, and put it in my pocket. Then I went back into the house where I found Tony still lying on the sofa, but with his eyes open.

"That was a crazy trick, George," I said. "I saw you from across the street."

"Thanks, Ira."

I made us both some coffee in the kitchen. When I came back he was sitting up. "Wildest thing," he said. "When I closed the garage door, all I wanted to do was end it. I wanted out." He sipped the hot coffee. "Now all I can think of is how glad I am to be alive."

"Damn fool," I said. Then, not too far from the point, I added, "What's a nice family guy like you doing without a family?"

"I got a family," he said. "In Montreal North."

"An old momma," I said. "But no family of your own."

"I guess she's the reason."

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We finished our coffee. Then I told him I'd listened to the tape and knew the mess he was in. "You'd better turn it over to the police," I said. "They'll close those guys down fast."

Ferro smiled wryly. "If that tape goes to the police, I'm a dead man for sure." He tried to get up. "I'm going to erase it."

I held him back. "I'll do better," I said. "I'll destroy it completely when I go home."

Now I'm home alone and it's late in the afternoon. I went downtown to Station Ten earlier and gave them the tape and the whole story that goes with it. They said they'd protect Tony, but I'm not sure they can guarantee that. They'll pick up Valenti and Cleveland, and then Tony will be out on a limb.

I just looked across at Tony's house. There's a light on and I can hear the piano. He's composing. In my mind right now there are two compartments. In one I see Tony dancing with Barbara on our back lawn while his song fills the night. In the other compartment I see my little girl in that dirty room downtown with a needle in her arm. And I can't help thinking it would have been better for everybody if I'd left my old friend alone in his garage this morning.

But, as Tony himself would put it, *"C'est voulu."*

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

Jerrold Phaon's first story, "Hunting Season," appeared in the November 1972 issue of EQMM, and was included by Allen J. Hubin in his Honor Roll of the best detective-crime short stories published during 1972. Distinguished as Mr. Phaon's debut in print was, his second story shows a great advance, in substance, perception, and sensitivity to his chosen material . . .

Please read "The Buzzing" slowly. Let the story grow on you. Let the long rambling sentences, the confusions, the undercurrents wash over you, soak into you . . . You will find it a rewarding and memorable reading experience . . .

THE BUZZING

by JERROLD PHAON

At 12:30 her oldest daughter Louise arrived, direct from the eleven o'clock Mass at Our Lady of Good Counsel, with her husband Michael and their two teen-aged sons, Bruce and Sonny. They came in through the kitchen where Theresa was still sweating over the stove. The ham was in, was almost done, but she was having trouble getting the rest together, the beans Tony had asked for, the ones he'd grown during the summer in his garden and that she'd spent four days cooking and canning back in the fall—all those tomatoes and peppers and beans and carrots, it seemed she never got away from her stove—and now the beans weren't going right, the stove was on the blink again, an old gas stove that never worked right from the day they bought it, always cooking too hot, and she was afraid the beans had burned at the bottom of the pot and there wouldn't be enough time to get new ones out of the freezer.

Tony would complain when the meal wasn't ready to be served all at once, he always complained about that, and no matter how hard she tried it never seemed to come out right, the potatoes

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were always cold by the time she got the gravy made, the vegetables were uncooked at the center, and nothing was ever seasoned right, always too much or not enough.

Louise was saying, "... so hot in here, Mother!" But Theresa didn't have time to turn, the lid was off the pot of beans, and, Lord, that steam hurt when she tried to get in there with the big spoon.

The lid clatterred to the floor.

"Mother, do you want some help?"

"No, no, your father's in the living room with his paper."

Bending now, her back aching, her burnt hand trembling as she reached for the fallen lid, Lord it never stops, never stops, even at night, lying there next to him, the ache, and she could only think with dread of the impending morning, of the alarm at 5:00 A.M. when she had to get out of bed and put the coffee on and make his lunch and prepare his breakfast, the way she'd done for years, and then calling him to get up, and wondering if he'd go to work that day or decide he wasn't well enough (he had "trouble with the old ticker," although Dr. Wilson said it was just not enough exercise, and now he was seeing that specialist in Abingdale, more money), and the worst part was the walk down Fifth Street, three blocks, all downhill and hard on her legs, to meet the Garment Workers bus that came at 6:45.

"Are you all right, Mother?" Louise asked.

"I'm fine," she said, wrapping the wounded hand in her damp apron and turning to face her daughter. Mike had already gone into the living room, she could hear Tony bragging to him in his loud voice about how much money he'd lost on his coin collection now that money was tight. Always the coins, or his bottle collection.

"Something's burning," Louise said.

"The beans," she answered miserably, turning back to her stove. "Your father's ..." She slid the pot back, off the burner, spilling boiling water.

"Boys, you go in with your father and Pappy. Go on now."

"Aw, Mom. We wanna go outside."

"You still have your good clothes on!"

"But, *Mom!*"

"Go on, now. Grammy needs some help." And Louise was tying on an apron, pulling dishes out of the cupboard, so efficient that it nearly made Theresa's head swim. "Honestly, Mother," Louise

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said. "I don't know why you have to be so independent."

The potatoes needed mashing, she remembered, and she could hear Tony calling loudly to Angela, the youngest grand-daughter, four years old, squealing with delight at all the attention she got. That meant Anita, her second oldest daughter and the only one to marry someone from her own Faith, had come with her husband Joseph. And Johnny's voice, too, her oldest son, so much like his father, but still unmarried at least and she could never be sure in her heart whether this was a sin or a blessing.

She scooped in butter and added milk and began squashing the potatoes, remembering there was still the ham, but maybe everything would be ready at the same time anyway, so he couldn't complain about that. She could hear Johnny teasing the child and she thought, he has his father's charm that's for sure and she'd heard some stories, at the factory, whispers near the milk machine, bits of buzzing gossip that she wasn't supposed to hear about Johnny, her Johnny, and his too, and about a girl, but she was sure Johnny wasn't the one, Father Delrosa had always praised him on being such a fine altar boy. Her Johnny would never do what they said.

Then Mary came in through the kitchen door. Poor Mary, she was Theresa's favorite, perhaps because she'd suffered too, a serious, sensitive girl, even when she was little, even when Tony was running that beer place beneath the pants factory, and all those brassy loud women came down at noon and drank beer with their lunches and Mary coming in after school to do the dishes for him. Mary smiled weakly, brushed a strand of hair from her face. "Mother . . ."

"Here, Mary," Louise said. "Take the silverware into the dining room. We're simply frantic."

But Mary ignored her sister, and when she spoke again, Theresa could almost taste the salt gathering at Mary's eyes. "Mother, the children . . ."

The potatoes were still lumpy, needed more milk. Theresa turned, looked at Mary. "What is it, dear?"

"Eddie wouldn't let me bring the children. He said Sunday was his day . . ."

"Oh, that Eddie!" But what else could she say, and when more words failed to come, and she remembered she'd put the milk back in the refrigerator and would have to get it out again to fix the potatoes, she could only cluck her tongue, thinking not

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of Eddie and the children, but of the milk, put away. Poor Mary, she should have never gone through with the divorce, should have never broken with the Church, she should have stayed with Eddie, even if he did chase after other women. Then Mary began to sob and slumped at the table, and Theresa darted bewildered eyes at Louise. Then Louise was soothing Mary, and the path to the refrigerator was open. She got the milk.

She could never get the milk part right, 35 years of making mashed potatoes for the man and they always came out too runny or too lumpy, or like paste. She remembered one time when the children were still little, impressionable, when he'd heaved a whole bowl across the kitchen, one of her best serving bowls too, one from the set that had been her mother's, and then he'd gone out to get drunk at the firehouse and left her there with the children crying. That had been just after Ruthann was born, and she had sworn he'd never touch her again, but then one night he did and later she'd found out she was going to have another baby.

That had been the one that died, a boy or girl, she got confused now when she tried to think about it, sometimes boy, sometimes girl, but it had died right after she'd brought it home from the hospital when they still lived in the house on Walnut Street, a trap, and he'd gone out and didn't come back and didn't come back and the baby kept squalling and thrashing, burning up with fever, and there was no phone and she'd had to run to the neighbor's for help, leaving the baby with Louise, who was only 12 then. It had died that night, at the hospital, after Mr. Trilli from next door had driven them to the emergency ward, and Tony didn't find out about it until the following afternoon, when he finally came home. Father Delrosa was with her, and Mr. Ninno, from the funeral parlor, was sitting in the living room, waiting to make the arrangements.

She scooped the potatoes into a bowl, then the beans, and put everything on the kitchen table and stood there, befuddled, thinking, What next? What next? until she remembered the celery in the refrigerator, under cellophane, and his wine, he liked his bottle of wine on the table next to his plate, and lately she'd been forgetting . . .

Louise said, "Mother, will you please sit down? I can handle it. You look pale. Mother!"

She let herself be pushed into a chair and sat there, thinking, Why can't they see I'm all right? She was just tired and she'd miss-

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ed Mass that morning and that had upset her, her bodily pains were slight, were nothing compared to the pain in her heart from missing Mass, and he'd done it on purpose, too, knowing how much it meant to her, once a week, some quiet, away from him, alone with God. She'd gone into the bathroom to prepare her bath, then while she was laying out her clothes he went in and locked the door. She heard him sing in his shower. He took a long time washing himself. Now, sitting, she could feel herself begin to drift, could hear the buzzing that she somehow remembered but couldn't quite place.

Then she heard his voice, close, "Is that ham ready yet?"

She looked up, blinked, saw him there, a carving knife and fork in his hands. He was sharpening the knife between the two prongs of the fork. Louise pulled the ham out of the oven and flipped off the timer on the stove.

The buzzing stopped.

Ruthann was late to dinner, as usual, coming in while Louise cut the pies that Theresa had baked the night before, putting them in the oven well past midnight. She was wearing wranglers, tight and dirty and faded in the seat, and a denim jacket covered with patches. She wore a floppy black hat, something new. She was 20, the youngest, except for the baby that had died, and she was his favorite because she'd come after the crisis time, had grown up after he'd decided to give up drinking and take a steady job, so that Ruthann didn't remember what it had been like and got the things the other didn't get. She was in college, a local state school, studying something Theresa never heard of, and living in an apartment with two other girls. She squeezed in next to Tony, put her elbows on the table, and said, "Hello, Poppalove, how does it feel to be out of the rat race?"

"I only hope I live a few more years," he said seriously, expansively, to everyone, "so that I can enjoy the things I've worked so hard for."

Theresa listened, gnawed on the ham that suddenly turned sour on her palate. He was only 64, but was retiring early because of his "health." His pension would not be enough and she'd have to work until she dropped just to bring in enough money to keep things going. How many years did she have left? She was 59, or was it 60 now? Yes, 60, there'd been that party, when all the children had come, and Louise's cake, they'd made such an event

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out of it, as though surviving to the age of 60 was some kind of remarkable event. But it only meant two more years to her retirement, if she lasted, and then what? Home all day with him, together?

"Eat some pie," he said to Ruthann. "You're skinny. Don't you feed yourself? There's plenty of ham. Get her some ham." This to Theresa, always the command, never even a direct address, it had been years since they'd used first names. She started to rise, then saw Louise dart for the kitchen with Ruthann's empty plate. She sat back, lowered her eyes.

"I think I'm going to get a new car," he announced then, throwing it in the direction of Mike who had a Chrysler dealership.

"What do you have against the car you got?" Mike said.

"It's only a Newport. I want a New Yorker."

"So you can be a bigshot in your old age."

"And this time it's got to be perfect."

"There's nothing wrong with the Newport. Hell, it's only two years old. You only have eight thousand miles on it. What do you want a new car for?"

"It's got rolls in the paint. I didn't say nothing about that when I got it because you're my son-in-law. But this one's got to be perfect. A New Yorker, with air conditioning."

"Oh, Daddy," Louise said. "Don't be foolish. You don't need another car. You don't go anywhere. And even when you do, you always take the Valiant. The Chrysler just sits there in the garage."

"My mind is made up."

"Hello, Mommasweet," Ruthann said, changing the subject.

Theresa tried to say something, but a piece of ham caught in her throat. She tried not to choke, felt the pressure build up until, finally, she had to gag, spit it out, get some air. She left the table and went into the kitchen. Mary followed, touching her shoulder as she leaned against the table.

"Mom, are you all right?"

"Fine, fine."

"You don't look well, Mom."

"I was just surprised. This business about the car. It was the first time I heard about it. And you know what happens when he makes up his mind."

"Mike will talk him out of it."

"We don't need it. All that money . . ."

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"Mom, don't upset yourself."

"When he got the Newport he swore it would be the last."

"I'm worried, Mom. About you."

"Go on in and eat. Finish eating." She looked at Mary, felt a wave of something close to pity pass over her. "Father Delrosa asked about you."

"Oh."

"You should go back. Go to see him."

"I can't."

"This other thing—this business with the divorce, it isn't, it isn't . . ."

"Oh, Momma. Try to understand. All those years I sat and watched. Watched what you and Poppa were doing to each other. And to us. I couldn't put myself through it. Or my children."

"You were married in God's eyes. In the Church."

"It was no marriage."

They stood there, facing each other, separated but tied at the same time by years of pain.

"I have never been happy with your father. But what other choice did I have? And now it is too late." She said this last to herself, admitting it finally, such an admission surely a sin. But wasn't this the truth that she'd known all along, known the past 35 years of her life? It left her feeling weak. She sat at the table. "Go in," she said. "They'll be wondering."

For a long time she just sat, drifting, listening to the buzzing, her mind going off but never completely lost, so that the voices from the dining room, somehow more hushed now, more subdued, funeral-parlor voices, came to her in strange hushed chapel fragments. At first they buzzed about the car, the car that Tony wanted and she'd have to pay for, handing over each of her checks at the end of each of her weeks until retirement. She knew that grace could be found by enduring suffering, but she'd always believed in the promise of something better, not a new adjustment to a worsening situation. Now that he was retired, what did the world hold for her? He would be home all day, complaining, making clutter, while she worked and picked up after him and listened to him.

The voices in the other room buzzed softer. About her. "She's been under such a strain . . ." "Do you think it's happening again?" "Maybe we should call Dr. Wilson." Drifting between Sunday morning hymns and the voice of Father Delrosa, an old

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man now, with hands that trembled when he did the sign of the cross. Some said he was dying.

What did she have left? The children grown, living their own lives. She alone with him. She wanted a year, two, whatever God granted her, to spend in sunshine, in peace, in a garden, her grandmother's orchard, so long ago, with heavy-laden apple trees and always the smell of lilac, bright splashes of warmth lulled by the lazy summer drones of beehives, buzzing . . .

Later, after the children had gone, he sat in the kitchen and munched on peanuts. Smacking his lips like that, the way she hated, talking about tomorrow, how the boss could go to hell, and laughing. It pressed on her.

He was evil, that was it. She knew it all along, evil in everything, so that now, remembering, the morning returned, that business with the bathroom, how he'd tried to drive her to Mass still dirty.

She listened until she felt she could listen no more. When she came out of the dark corner of the kitchen that he'd driven her to, there was the long slender carving knife in her hand. She planted it deeply in the middle of his back.

She left him slumped at the table and went to bed. She slept. In the morning, before dawn, she emptied the freezer on the back porch of all the frozen vegetables from his garden and somehow managed to dump his body inside the freezer.

Then she showered and walked up the hill to the church. In the confessional, before the six o'clock Mass, she confessed to God. It wasn't until after she'd come home and shed her Sunday clothes that she called the Chief of Police and confessed to him.

It was warm where she was, and sunny. Bright yellows and shiny greens. She enjoyed sitting in it, bathing in it. It was nice. Comforting. Like being in Heaven. She had a room with a bed and there were flowers in the room, fresh ones every day. A young girl brought them in, kissed her. Said: "Mother?"

Nice, she thought. And sweet. Sweet-smelling. So warm, like living in softness.

She looked up.

Mary.

"Are they taking good care of you, Mother?"

So hard to remember what people say. Better to look at the flowers. In the late afternoon she liked to come out and listen to

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the hiss of the water sprinklers. Nothing to remember. Just a gentle hissing sound. Nice. She had a favorite place, a bench near the little grove of fruit trees.

She was sitting there now, listening.

Mary said, "Mother, are you happy? Do you need anything?"

She looked up. "Listen," she said. "Do you hear it?"

"What?"

"The bees, dear. Hear them?"

She turned away then and drifted. She listened to the buzzing. She waited. Her grandmother would be calling her to come in soon.

CRIMINALIMERICK

REBECCA OF COLD COMFORT FARM

by D. R. BENSEN

The setting is plain or exotic;
The love story's quite un-erotic;
There are screams in the night
In a house full of fright —
And that's how you whip up a Got'ic.

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an INSPECTOR MAIGRET novelet by

GEORGES SIMENON

first publication in the United States

Portrait of Inspector Maigret working—and (seemingly) not working: "It was the slack period of the investigation, the one during which a crotchety Maigret spoke to no one, but drank glasses of beer and smoked one pipeful after another with the restlessness of a caged bear; it was the period of loose ends when all the accumulated bits and pieces seemed to contradict each other, when one looked in vain for a fresh line of inquiry in a welter of information, harassed by the thought of choosing a wrong line that will lead nowhere."

THE INN OF THE DROWNED

by GEORGES SIMENON

"Are you sure you won't take shelter?" urged the local Chief of Police with some embarrassment.

Maigret stood with his hands deep in his overcoat pockets; the brim of his hat was filled to overflowing like a gutter from which, it seemed, all the water would suddenly be drained by the slightest jerk.

This was the scowling, monolithic, unshakeable Maigret one saw when things were going badly, the same who now grunted "No!" without removing the stem of his pipe from between his clenched teeth.

It is an odd fact that really tiresome affairs—the ones from which one has the greatest trouble extricating oneself and which end more or less unpleasantly—are always those in which one quite stupidly allows oneself to become involved by pure chance or those which one lacks the courage to refuse when there is still time to say no.

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Once again this was the case with Maigret. He had come to Nemours the previous day on a matter of minor importance which he had to arrange with Pillement, the local Chief of Police.

The Chief was a charming, cultured man, a sportsman and a product of the cavalry school at Saumur.

He had insisted on doing Maigret the honors of his table and his cellar and then, as a deluge of rain fell, he had invited him to sleep in the guest room.

The autumn weather was at its worst: for the last two weeks everyone had been living in constant rain and fog while branches of trees were swept downstream in the swollen muddy waters of the Loing.

"That's all it needed," sighed Maigret when he heard the telephone ringing at six o'clock in the morning before it had even grown light.

A few minutes later the Chief of Police was whispering through the door, "Are you asleep, Inspector?"

"No, I'm awake!"

"Would you mind very much coming out with me? It's a place about nine and a half miles from here. A curious accident happened there last night."

Maigret went of course.

It was on the banks of the Loing, just where the main road runs parallel with the river, between Nemours and Montargis.

The scene was enough to discourage anyone from getting up early in the morning: the sky was cold and heavy, the rain still fell in great slanting sheets, the river flowed muddy and brown. A row of poplars beyond marked the line of the canal.

There was no village in sight. The only inn, the Fisherman's Inn, was nearly half a mile away and Maigret already knew that in the district it was more usually called the Inn of the Drowned.

As for the people drowned this time, nothing was yet known of them. A crane moved to and fro with much creaking and grinding of machinery, while two men wearing oilskins just like seamen could be seen working a diver's pump.

Five or six cars had been parked on the side of the road. Now and again others coming from both directions slowed down or stopped to find out what was happening before driving on. Policemen in uniform were there too, and an ambulance which had been sent for during the night in case of emergency but which was obvi-

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ously no longer necessary.

There was nothing to do but wait—wait until the car now lying beneath the swirling waters in the full force of the current could be securely fixed to the crane and pulled out of the river.

A ten-ton truck stood pulled in to one side just before the bend in the road, one of those foul-smelling monsters which roar along the main roads night and day.

Nobody knew exactly what had happened.

On the previous evening the truck, which had a regular run between Paris and Lyons, passed along the same road just after eight o'clock. As it was rounding the bend it had crashed into a car which had been standing without any lights on and the car had been pitched forward into the Loing.

The driver of the truck, Joseph Lecoin, thought he had heard shouts, and the boatman of the *Belle Thérèse,* a barge moored in the canal just over a hundred yards away, also maintained he had heard cries for help.

The two men had met on the river bank and had made ineffectual attempts at a search with the help of a hand torch. Then the truck driver had continued as far as Montargis where he had called the police.

Since the scene of the accident was in a district which fell under the jurisdiction of Nemours, the police there had also been notified but, as it was useless to attempt anything before daylight, the sergeant had not called his chief until six o'clock.

It was a dreary morning. Everyone was cold and stood about with hunched shoulders, looking at the muddy waters without even a trace of anxiety on their faces.

The innkeeper was there, sheltered under an enormous umbrella and discussing the matter like an expert.

"If the bodies are not in the car they won't be found for ages because all the weirs are open; they'll be taken down to the Seine, unless they get caught on some roots."

"They can't possibly still be in the car," replied the truck driver. "It was an open model."

"That's queer," said the innkeeper.

"Why?"

"Because yesterday I had two young customers who came in an open car. They slept at the inn and had breakfast. They must still be in bed back there now. I haven't set eyes on them since."

Maigret was really not listening to this chatter, but he heard it and took it all in.

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The diver emerged at last and his huge copper headpiece was eagerly unscrewed.

"You can go ahead," he announced. "The tackle is hooked on quite securely."

On the roadway cars were sounding their horns, not understanding the reason for the delay. Heads appeared at car windows.

The crane, which had been brought from Montargis, was making earsplitting noises. Finally the upper part of the body of a gray car could be seen emerging from the water, then the hood, then the wheels.

Maigret had wet feet and the bottoms of his trousers were muddy. He would have liked a cup of hot coffee, but he did not want to leave the scene of operations to go right back to the inn and Pillement, the Chief of Police, didn't dare to make any further efforts to look after Maigret's comfort.

"Careful, boys! Ease it a bit on the left."

The front of the car bore clear traces of the collision, and this proved that, as the truck driver had already asserted, the sports car was facing in the direction of Paris at the moment of the accident.

"Heave! One, two—heave!"

The car was finally brought to the bank. It looked like a strange model, with twisted wheels, fenders crumpled like pieces of paper, and the seats already smothered with mud and refuse.

The sergeant was making a note of the license number while the Police Chief searched the dashboard for the plaque which carried the owner's name.

This bore the words: R. Daubois, 135 Avenue des Ternes, Paris.

"I'll get them to ring up that address, shall I, Inspector?"

Maigret seemed to be saying, "Do whatever you like! It's no business of mine!"

That was a job for a policeman, not for an Inspector from police headquarters in Paris. A sergeant had already gone off on a motorcycle to telephone Paris.

Everyone, including a dozen curious passengers who had got out of passing cars, crowded round the wreck now that it had been dragged from the river.

Some of them, without thinking, fingered the body of the car or bent down to peer inside. In the end it was a stranger who was curious enough to try the handle of the trunk compartment.

The car was so buckled that no one expected it to open, but it did quite easily.

With a cry the man fell back

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two or three steps while the people near him rushed forward to have a look.

Maigret walked over with the others; then he frowned and for the first time since the early morning spoke in a voice which was not a growl. "Come on there! Stand back! Nothing must be touched!" He had also seen it.

He had seen a human body strangely doubled over, wedged down in the bottom of the trunk, as if it had required some force to close the compartment.

A mass of platinum blonde hair on top of this heap indicated it was a woman.

"Chief, have the place cleared, will you? There's something else, something rather ugly."

And ugly work to come! Just to lift out the woman's body from the sodden interior!

"Can you smell something?"

"Yes."

"You don't think that. . ."

Oh, yes. They had proof of it a quarter of an hour later. One of the onlookers was a doctor and he examined the body on the grass by the roadside.

They had to keep pushing back the people who wanted to have a look, including some children.

"She's been dead for at least three days."

Someone was tugging at Maigret's sleeve.

It was Justin Rozier, the owner of the Inn of the Drowned.

"I recognize the car," he announced in a smug conspiratorial manner. "It belongs to my young customers."

"Have you got their names?"

"They filled in their form."

The doctor intervened.

"Of course you know it's a crime?"

"What was the weapon?"

"A razor. This woman has had her throat cut."

And still the rain came down, drenching the car as well as the body, soaking all the onlookers silhouetted in the gray morning.

A motorcycle drew up and the sergeant jumped off.

"The car doesn't belong to Monsieur Daubois any longer. I spoke to him on the phone. He sold it last week to a man who owns a garage near the Porte Maillot."

"And the garage owner?"

"I rang him. The garage sold the car again three days ago to a young man who paid cash, so there is no record of his name."

"But, I keep telling you. I've got the name!" said the innkeeper impatiently. "Just come back with me."

Before Maigret went into the

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inn to look at the register, the editor of the only newspaper in Montargis and correspondent of one of the big Paris dailies arrived on the scene.

Goodness knows how he had made his inquiries, for Maigret sent him packing—and so did Chief Pillement—but this did not prevent him from spending more than a quarter of an hour in the phone booth almost as soon as he arrived.

An hour later Press cards had to be shown to the policeman on duty who was preventing the inn from being overrun by curious idlers.

Photographers were there too, scrambling over tables and chairs and taking shots of scenes totally unconnected with the affair.

As for Maigret, he was getting an answer on the line from Paris.

"The Sûreté Nationale agrees. Since you are on the spot, you can carry on with the investigations unofficially. During the course of the day an Inspector from the Rue de Saussaie will be sent to you."

In short, it was a strange business.

A strange inn, too, oddly placed at a sudden turning in the road. Maigret had just learned that this was the third car in five years which had fallen into the Loing at this spot.

The other two cases were not so mysterious; they were cars which had driven straight in at full speed. Their drivers had not expected the bend in the road and, being unable to pull up in time, had plunged into the river.

In one of them a family of five people had been trapped. In the second there had been only one victim.

There was now even more reason for giving the inn its nickname—the Inn of the Drowned—because one Whit Sunday a young woman had deliberately jumped into the river as a result of some personal tragedy and had been drowned while all the time her husband sat fishing about a hundred yards away.

The Inn of the Drowned! You had only to stand near the phone booth where the journalists went in one after the other to realize that before the evening was out it would be famous.

The Mystery of the Inn of the Drowned. . .The Crime of the Inn of the Drowned. . .The Riddle of the Gray Car.

Maigret sat smoking his pipe in heavy silence.

As he ate an enormous ham sandwich, washed down with beer, he watched the usual excitement that always complicates the task of the police.

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Out of all this crowd only two characters interested him: the boatman of the *Belle Thérèse* and Joseph Lecoin, the driver of the truck.

The boatman had sought him out with some deference.

"You know that we get a bonus for making good time. I ought to have left this morning. So, if its possible—"

"Where are you going to unload?"

"Quai des Tournelles in Paris. I've one more day on the canal, then not quite a whole day on the Seine. I'll be there the day after tomorrow, in the evening."

Maigret made him go over his statement again.

"We had finished our supper and my wife had already gone to bed. I was just going to bed when I heard a funny noise . . .When you're down inside the boat you can't tell very well . . .I put my head out of the hatchway. I thought I heard a voice calling for help."

"What kind of voice?"

"Just a voice. The rain was beating on the deck, which is covered with tarpaulin. The voice was quite some way off."

"Man's or woman's?"

"More like a man's."

"How long after the first noise?"

"I shouldn't think immediately after, because I was just taking off my shoes and I stopped to put on my slippers."

"Then what did you do?"

"I couldn't go out in slippers, so I went below again, put on my leather jacket and galoshes and said to my wife, who hadn't yet fallen asleep. 'I'm going out. There may be someone drowning.' "

"Why did you think it was someone drowning?"

"Because for us living on the river and the canal, that's generally what it means when we hear someone shouting for help. I've saved more than five with my boat hook."

"So you walked over towards the river?"

"I was already there, as you might say, seeing that there are only some twenty yards separating the canal and the river at this spot. I saw the headlights of a truck and then I caught sight of a hefty-looking man walking along—"

"The truck driver? Would it be that man over there?"

"Yes. He told me he had crashed into a car which had then run straight into the river. I went back inside and got my flashlight."

"In other words, all that took some time?"

"Yes. It must have."

"What was the driver doing all this time?"

"I don't know. I suppose he

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was seeing if he could spot anything in the darkness."

"Did you go over to his truck?"

"I might have . . . I don't remember. I was mainly concerned whether I might see a body come to the surface."

"So you don't know if the driver was alone in his truck?"

"I suppose if there had been anyone he would have come and helped us."

"When you realized there was nothing you could do, what did the driver say to you?"

"That he was going to call the police."

"Did he say which police station?"

"No, I don't think so."

"And you didn't think to tell him that he could telephone from the inn, which is only half a mile away?"

"I thought of it afterwards when I saw him driving off."

The driver was one of these heavily built men, a kind of Hercules. He had rung up his firm and warned them that he was detained by the police as a result of an accident.

He was now awaiting subsequent events quite placidly, allowing the journalists to buy him drinks in exchange for endless repetitions of his story.

Maigret took him on one side to a small private dining room.

"I thought that usually there were always two drivers to a truck, especially on the long runs?"

"Yes, there often are. I've been driving on my own for the past week because my mate hurt his hand and is on sick leave."

"What time did you leave Paris?"

"At two o'clock. I've a mixed load, and with the slippery roads I couldn't drive fast."

"I suppose you stopped for an evening meal in a café used by other drivers?"

"I should think so! We've got our own places. We see each other there at about the same times. I stopped immediately after leaving Nemours, at the Mère Catherine where the food's first-class."

"How many trucks were there, outside?"

"Four. Two moving vans from the firm of Morin, a gasoline truck, and a long-distance truck."

"Did you eat with the other drivers?"

"There were three of us together and the others were at the next table."

"What order did you leave in?"

"I don't know about the others, but I went off last because I was waiting for a call to Paris."

"Whom did you ring up?"

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"The boss, to ask him to have some piston rings waiting at Moulins. I had noticed the engine wasn't running true and that the third cylinder—"

"All right. What distance do you think you were behind your friends?"

"I left ten minutes after the last one, which was a moving van. He must have been two and a half to three miles ahead of me."

"And you only saw the sports car at the time of the accident?"

"A few yards in front of me, when it was too late to prevent the collision."

"There wasn't a single light?"

"Not one."

"And you noticed no one?"

"It's difficult to say. It was raining. My windshield wiper isn't that good. All I know is that when the car was in the water I had the impression that in the darkness, someone was trying to swim. Then I heard a sort of cry for help."

"One more question: just now, in the box under your seat, I noticed a flashlight in perfect working order. Why didn't you go and fetch it?"

"I don't know. I lost my head. I was afraid my truck might also end up in the Loing."

"When you passed this inn, wasn't it lit up?"

"It might have been."

"Do you do this trip often?"

"Twice a week."

"Didn't it enter your head to telephone from the inn?"

"No, I thought that Montargis wasn't far and I went there."

"While you were searching along the river bank, could anyone have hidden in your truck?"

"I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"Because they would have had to untie the ropes on the tarpaulin."

"That's all, then. Thank you. Of course you know you will have to stay here in case I need you."

"If it's of any use."

The driver's only concern was to eat and drink well and Maigret saw him making his way to the kitchen to give his order for lunch.

It was Madame Rozier, a thin sallow woman, who did the cooking and she found herself overwhelmed by such a sudden influx of people.

Added to that, she could hardly manage to snatch the receiver between one journalist and another to phone her orders through to the town.

A young maid, Lili, with a face too knowing for her age, was exchanging jokes with everyone in the room as she served apéritifs, and the landlord, behind the bar, had not a moment's peace.

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It was a slack time of the year. If, in summer, the inn could rely only on tourists, lovers, and anglers, in the fall they scarcely had any visitors except a few sportsmen from Paris who rented a shooting lodge in the district and who had their meals on set days.

Rozier declared to Maigret:

"The day before yesterday, in the evening I saw a young couple draw up in a gray car, the one which has been fished out of the river. I thought at once they were young newlyweds. Here's the form I made them fill out."

The writing on the form was pointed and nervous.

"Jean Vertbois, aged 20, advertising agent, 18 rue des Acacias, Paris." The reply to a question on the form was: "Coming from Paris, going to Nice."

Finally, when asked for his companion's form, the young man had added, right across the page: "And wife."

The information had already been telephoned to Paris and inquiries were being made in the rue des Acacias, in the seventeenth arrondissement, not far from the garage where the car had been bought.

"A pretty girl between seventeen and eighteen," said the innkeeper in answer to Maigret's question. "Between ourselves I called her Miss Dainty. She wore too thin a frock for this time of the year and a sports jacket."

"Did the couple have any luggage with them?"

"One suitcase which is still upstairs."

But the bag contained only men's suits and underwear, which seemed to suggest that the mystery girl's coming away from home had been unpremeditated.

Maigret asked the innkeeper: "Did Jean Vertbois and the girl seem nervous?"

"Not particularly. They spent a good part of yesterday in their room. Lili took up their breakfast."

"They didn't tell you why, since they were going to Nice, they were stopping less than sixty miles from Paris?"

"I think they would have stopped anywhere, provided they had a room."

"And the car?"

"It was in the garage. You've seen it. A deluxe model but several years old, the kind bought by people who haven't much money. It gives an appearance of wealth and costs less than a new standard model."

"You weren't sufficiently inquisitive to open the trunk?"

"I wouldn't dream of it."

Maigret shrugged, for this

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fellow was telling him nothing that was worth hearing and he knew the sort of inquisitiveness shown by landlords like this.

"So the couple were planning to come back to your place to sleep?"

"To have an evening meal and to sleep. We waited until ten o'clock at night before clearing the table."

"What time was the car taken from the garage?"

"Just a minute . . . It was already getting dark round about half-past four. I guessed that after staying shut up so long in their room our young people felt like seeing a bit of life at Montargis or some other place. The suitcase was still there, so, of course, I didn't worry about the bill."

"You knew nothing about the accident?"

"Nothing until the arrival of the police, about eleven o'clock at night."

"And you thought at once that it concerned your visitors?"

"I was afraid of it. I had noticed that the young man made rather a mess of driving out of the garage. He was obviously an inexperienced driver. Of course, we locals know the sharp corner down near the river."

"Did anything strike you as strange in the couple's conversation?"

"I didn't listen to their conversation."

So the case could be summarised like this:

On the Monday, about five o'clock in the afternoon, a certain Jean Vertbois, aged 20, advertising agent, living at 18 rue des Acacias in Paris, bought from a garage near where he was living a deluxe car—but an out-of-date model—which he had paid for with five one-thousand franc notes.

(They had just told Maigret on the phone that the garage man had the impression that his customer's wallet contained another large wad of notes. Vertbois had not argued about the price and had announced that he would have the identity plaque changed the following day.)

Nothing was known of the events of Tuesday. On Wednesday, in the evening, the same Vertbois drove up in his car in front of the Inn of the Drowned about 60 miles from Paris in the company of a young girl, whom the landlord of the inn—and he had excellent reasons for being an expert on the subject—took to be somebody of good family.

On Thursday the couple went out in the car as though they were merely going for a drive in the district and some hours

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later, while standing without lights, the car had been hit by a truck nearly half a mile from the inn and both the driver of the truck and a boatman thought they had heard shouts in the night.

Of Jean Vertbois and the girl there was no trace. All the local police had been making inquiries in the neighborhood since the morning.

At the railway stations they had drawn a blank. On the farms, in the inns, on the roads, nobody answered to the description of the couple.

On the other hand, in the trunk compartment of the car a body had been discovered—that of a woman between 45 and 50, well groomed and smartly dressed.

And the police doctor confirmed the statement of the doctor who had happened to be passing at the time, which was that this woman had been murdered on Monday, slashed with a razor.

With less certainty the police doctor had given as his opinion that the body had been put in the trunk—and clumsily packed in—only a few hours after death.

The conclusion was that when the couple had arrived at the inn there was already a dead body in the car.

Did Vertbois know this?

Did his young companion know?

What was their car doing at eight o'clock in the evening, parked without any lights, by the side of the road?

Was it a breakdown which an inexperienced driver could not repair?

Who was in the car at that moment?

And who had shouted in the night?

The local Chief of Police, a perfect gentleman, took care not to interfere with Maigret in his inquiries; but on the other hand, he made every effort himself to collect as much data as possible with the help of his men.

Ten flat-bottomed boats plowed along the Loing, which was being sounded with poles. Men were floundering about on the bank and others were fussing round the weirs. The journalists regarded the inn as conquered territory and installed themselves in it like masters, filling every room with their deafening hubbub.

The *Belle Thérèse* barge had set out for the Quai des Tournelles with its consignment of tiles and the driver of the truck, unmoved by all these comings and goings, wisely made the best he could of this paid holiday.

As the newspaper headlines

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came rolling off the printing presses they appeared all the larger for being more sensational.

The record was held by a reporter who had written:

"Two twenty-year-old lovers drive with a body in the trunk." Then, in italics:

The muddy waters of the Loing swallow up the criminals and their victim.

It was the slack period of the investigation, the one during which a crotchety Maigret spoke to no one, but drank glasses of beer and smoked one pipeful after another with the restlessness of a caged bear; it was the period of loose ends when all the accumulated bits and pieces seemed to contradict each other, when one looked in vain for a fresh line of inquiry in a welter of information, harassed by thought of choosing a wrong line that will lead nowhere.

To make matters worse, the inn was poorly heated, and by central heating at that, which Maigret especially disliked.

Finally, the cooking was third-rate and, to meet the needs of the increasing numbers who wanted to eat, they had thinned the sauces.

"Please excuse me for saying what I am about to say, Inspector."

Chief Pillement smiled discreetly as he sat down opposite a Maigret who looked more than usually surly.

"I know that you have a bit of a grudge against me. For my part, I am delighted to have secured your services because I'm beginning to think that this road accident, which started out by seeming so ordinary, is going to work up into one of the most baffling mysteries you could possibly imagine."

Maigret simply helped himself to potato salad, sardines, and beetroot, the classic hors-d'oeuvres of third-rate inns.

"When we know who the pretty girl in love is—"

A large mud-splashed car drew up outside the door, with a uniformed chauffeur at the wheel; a gray-haired man got out and backed instinctively at the sight of the battery of photographers who trained their cameras on him on the off chance.

"Look," said Maigret, lowering his voice. "I'll bet that's her father."

The Inspector had been right, but if he was dreading a painful scene he was spared it by the remarkable dignity of Monsieur La Pommeraye, a lawyer. Having brushed aside the journalists like a man accustomed to show authority, he had fol-

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lowed Maigret into the tiny private drawing room and had introduced himself.

"Germain La Pommeraye, notary at Versailles."

His profession, coupled with the town of royal repute, exactly suited this tall well-bred person. He kept his face almost perfectly under control while he asked with gaze fixed on the ground, "Have you found her?"

Maigret sighed. "I'm going to have to ask you a certain number of rather frank questions. I'm sorry."

The notary made a gesture which meant: "Go ahead. I know what to expect."

"Can you tell me, first of all, what made you think your daughter could be mixed up in this affair?"

"I'll explain. My daughter Vivianne, is seventeen, and looks twenty. I say *is* although I probably ought to say *was*. She's an impulsive girl, like her mother. And rightly or wrongly, especially since my wife died, I've always refrained from going against her wishes. I don't know where she met this Jean Vertbois but I seem to remember it was at the swimming pool or a sports club near Boulogne."

"Do you know Jean Vertbois personally?"

"I've seen him once. My daughter's an impulsive girl, as I've said already. One evening she announced, without any warning: 'Papa, I'm going to get married!' "

Maigret got up from his seat, and went and flung open the door. He contented himself with giving a scornful look at the journalist who had had his ear at the keyhole.

"Go on, please."

"First of all, I took it as a joke. Then seeing that it was serious, I asked to see the young man. And that's how Jean Vertbois came to Versailles one afternoon.

"One detail made a bad impression on me immediately: he had driven up in an expensive sports car which he had borrowed from a friend. I don't know whether you see my point? Young people certainly have the right to follow their ambitions but, at twenty, I don't like to see them indulging luxurious tastes, especially rather flashy ones."

"In short, the interview was on the whole chilly?"

"It was decidedly stormy. I asked the young man with what means he was proposing to keep a wife and he replied with impudent frankness that, while he was waiting for a more attractive job, my daughter's allowance would at any rate prevent her from dying of hunger.

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"You see, a perfect example of the young opportunist, as cynical in his talk as his intentions! So much so that, at one point, I wondered if it were a pose, a coverup for a certain amount of diffidence.

"Vertbois spoke to me at great length about the rights which parents take upon themselves and about the out-of-date ideas of some members of the upper class. He was good enough to describe me as a perfect example.

"After an hour, I showed him the door."

"How long ago is it since young Vertbois told you he was going to marry your daughter for her money?" asked Maigret.

"Barely a week. When I saw my daughter afterwards, she announced that she would not marry any man but Vertbois, that I didn't know him, that I had misjudged him, and so on. And, moreover, she threatened that if I didn't agree to the marriage she would run away with him."

"And did you give in?"

"Alas! I thought it was just an empty threat. I counted on time settling everything . . . Now Vivianne has been missing since Tuesday afternoon.

"That same Tuesday evening I went to Vertbois' address in the rue des Acacias, but I was told he had gone away on a journey. I questioned the concierge and I was left in no doubt that he was accompanied by quite a young girl—that is, by Vivianne. That's why when I read of last night's happening in the paper today . . ."

He was still calm and dignified, yet a few beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. He looked away and said clearly, "There's only one thing I would ask from you, Inspector: the truth. I am strong enough to take a sudden shock but I could not survive long periods of alternating between hope and despair. In your opinion is my daughter alive?"

Maigret sat for some time without answering.

At last he said quietly, "Let me ask you one last question. You seem to me to know your daughter very well. Her love for Vertbois seems to be overwhelming, as romantic as it is passionate. Do you think that, if she had known Vertbois was a murderer, your daughter would have made herself his accomplice out of love?

"Don't answer too quickly. Suppose your daughter arrives at her lover's place—excuse me, but the word is unfortunately true—and she hears that in order to run away with her and find the necessary money for this flight he has been driven to commit murder . . ."

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The two men were silent for a moment. Finally Monsieur La-Pomeraye gave a sigh and said, "I just don't know. But I can tell you one thing, Inspector, one thing which nobody knows. I told you just now I was a widower, which is true. My wife died three years ago in South America where eight years earlier she had run off with a coffee planter. Now, when she was ready to leave, she took a hundred thousand francs from the office safe. Vivianne is so much like her mother—"

He gave a start on hearing Maigret sigh.

"I hope she is!"

"Why?"

"Because, if Jean Vertbois has nothing to fear from his companion, he has no reason to get rid of her. If, on the other hand, your daughter has shown her feelings and threatened him—"

"I see what you mean, but I don't follow the sequence of events as they are described in the newspapers. At the time of the collision the car wasn't empty, since the driver of the truck and a boatman heard cries. Vertbois and Vivianne had no reason to leave each other. So it seems probable—"

"They have been dragging the river since this morning, but up to now they've had no result. Will you come with me for a moment to the room which the couple occupied in this inn?"

It was an ordinary-looking room with flowered wallpaper, a brass bedstead, and a mahogany wardrobe with a mirror on the door. On the washstand were a few objects—razor, shaving brush, and two toothbrushes, one of which was new.

"You see," remarked Maigret, "the man had his own things. But the two of them must have stopped on the way to buy a toothbrush for the girl, also these traveling slippers I can see near the bed. But I wish I could have found something that proved it was your daughter who—"

"That's hers," said her father sadly, pointing to a jewel which lay glinting faintly on the rug.

"Vivianne always wore earrings—these once belonged to her mother. One of them did not fasten properly; she used to lose it regularly and then, as if by a miracle, she'd find it again.

"This is one of them. Do you still think I've any chance left of finding my daughter alive?"

Maigret dared not answer that in any case Mademoiselle Vivianne La Pommeraye would probably be accused of being an accessory to murder. . .

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With the rain still falling, the Inn of the Drowned looked more and more like a command post.

Some journalists were resignedly playing cards; they had got tired of standing about in the pouring rain to watch the boatmen sounding the river.

The Chief of Police had put a car at the disposal of the Inspector. However, Maigret did not use it.

To anyone unfamiliar with Maigret's methods, his haphazard method of working was not calculated to inspire confidence.

So when they saw him going into the phone booth, the reporters thought they were going to hear of some new development and, being indiscreet by profession, did not hesitate to go and stand by the door.

But it was the Observatory in Paris that Maigret had on the line. He began by asking for the latest weather forecast, insisting on certain details.

"You say there was no moon yesterday evening about eight o'clock? Will it be the same today? What's that? It rises at twelve minutes past midnight? Thank you very much."

As he came out, he looked really pleased. He even allowed himself the sly pleasure of announcing to the journalists, "Gentlemen, a piece of good news: we are in for at least three more days of pouring rain."

Then he was seen having a long conversation with Chief Pillement who then disappeared and was not seen again for the rest of the day.

There was some steady drinking going on. Someone had opened a bottle of Vouvray and then they were all clamoring for some.

It grew dark at half-past four and this put an end to the sounding operations in the Loing. It was becoming unlikely that bodies would be found now, since the current had had time to carry them downstream as far as the Seine.

To clear the road, a towing truck had come and fetched the car that had been pulled out of the river. It had been towed away to Montargis where it was kept at the disposal of the police.

It was six o'clock when a reporter summoned the landlord and asked him jauntily, "What are you going to give us that's nice for dinner tonight?"

And a voice was heard to answer, "Nothing at all!"

The landlord was the most astonished one there, and he looked around to see who had dared to answer for him. And to answer in a way that was so bad for business.

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It was Maigret, who was calmly walking over to the group.

"As a matter of fact, I'm going to ask you gentlemen not to have your evening meal here tonight. I won't forbid you to come back about ten o'clock, if you want to, or even to sleep at the inn. But I'm particularly anxious that from seven until ten only the people who were here last night should be on the premises."

"A reconstruction of the crime?" someone called out, knowingly.

"Not a bit! I warn you at once that it's no good hanging about here. There'll be nothing to see. On the other hand, if you behave sensibly, you will probably have a good story for your tomorrow-morning's editions."

"What time?"

"Let's say, before eleven o'clock. In Montargis I know a place where you can get an excellent meal—the Hotel de la Cloche. Go there, all of you. Mention my name to the landlord and you'll be looked after perfectly. When I come and join you—"

"Aren't you having dinner with us?"

"I've got another appointment. But I won't be long joining you. Now, take it or leave it. If any of you tries to pull a fast one, I promise he won't get the least little bit of information . . .Gentlemen, I'll be seeing you soon; enjoy your meal!"

When they had gone, Maigret breathed more easily and glanced mischievously at the furious landlord.

"Come on! It's the 'lemonade' you make the money on, not the meals. Well, they've been drinking since the morning."

"And they would have gone right on!"

"Listen to me. It is essential that from seven until ten everyone in the inn should be in the place they were in yesterday, and that the lights should be the same."

"That's easy."

There remained someone whom all the others seemed to have forgotten—Joseph Lecoin the truck driver.

He was watching Maigret and finally opened his mouth. "What about me?"

"You are going to drive me to Nemours."

"In the truck?"

"And why not? Since we haven't got a luxury car—"

"Just as you like. If it's of any help to you."

And so it was that Inspector Maigret left the Inn of the Drowned sitting in the cab of a ten-ton truck which drove off with an infernal racket.

"Where shall I drop you?"

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They had come all the way without a word in the darkness and the rain, sometimes meeting cars which dimmed their lights, and the windshield wiper made a steady low buzzing sound like a large bumble bee.

"You're not going to drop me, my friend!"

The driver looked at his companion with astonishment, thinking that he was joking.

"Well, then what? Go back to Paris?"

"No. Wait while I look at the time."

Maigret had to use his lighter to see his watch: the hands were at half-past seven.

"Good! Stop at the first bistro you come to. We've plenty of time. . ."

On Maigret's orders Lecoin pulled up at a café.

Maigret turned up the collar of his overcoat before crossing the pavement and entering the little café; then, as if he were quite at home, he leaned on the bar in the company of Lecoin, much to Lecoin's surprise. The truck driver was puzzled by the change which had come over the Inspector's behavior.

Not that he had become more forbidding. Or that he betrayed his ill-humor in any way whatsoever. The opposite was true. He was calm and sometimes his eyes even twinkled.

He was sure of himself now and, if anyone had asked him, he would have said, "Isn't life grand!"

He sipped his apéritif, looked at his watch again, paid for the drinks, and said, "Let's be on our way."

"Where are we going?"

"First of all, to have a meal at La Mère Catherine as you did last night. See! It's raining just the same. And we're at the same time exactly."

Only three trucks were parked in front of the inn. Outside, it looked modest, to say the least, but the drivers knew they could find good stews here. The manageress herself served with the help of her fourteen-year-old daughter.

"Well! So you're back again?" she said as she saw Lecoin come in.

Lecoin shook hands with the other drivers before sitting down in a corner with the Inspector.

"Supposing we order the same as you had yesterday?" suggested Maigret.

"There aren't umpteen dishes to choose from here. You have to have Today's Special . . . See! It's stewed veal."

"One of my favorite dishes."

During the past five minutes it seemed that a subtle change had come over this giant of a truck driver.

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His mood was less natural. He kept stealing furtive glances at the man talking to him and he was probably wondering what the policeman was up to.

"Hurry up, Catherine. We drivers haven't got all day."

"You always say that and then you sit another half hour over your coffee."

The stew was excellent, and the coffee much better than the kind usually found in bistros. From time to time Maigret would pull his watch from his pocket; he seemed to be waiting for the departure of the other drivers with a certain amount of impatience.

They stood up at last, after a round of old brandies, and shortly afterward their engines could be heard starting up.

"Some brandy for us, too," Maigret ordered, then said to Lecoin, "Is that just how things happened yesterday?"

"Yes, it was. This is about the time I would have been leaving. By now I had already had my telephone call."

"Let's go."

"Are we going back?"

"Exactly the same as yesterday. Any objection?"

"Me? Why should I mind? Seeing that I've nothing to hide."

Just at this moment Catherine walked over and asked the driver, "Did you give my message to Benoit?"

"Of course. It's all settled."

Once they were sitting in the driver's cab, Maigret asked, "Who's Benoit?"

"He keeps a filling station at Montargis. He's a pal of mine. I always stop at his place to fill up. Mère Catherine wants to have a pump installed as well and I had to tell Benoit."

"Still raining hard, isn't it?"

"Even a bit more than yesterday. You just imagine driving all night in that downpour."

"We're not going too fast, are we?"

"Exactly the same as yesterday."

And Maigret lit his pipe.

"It's always us drivers," muttered Lecoin. "They always pick on us. They say we stick to the middle of the road and we don't pull in quickly enough. But if those people who drive small cars had to steer great hulks like ours—"

Suddenly there was an oath and the brakes were jammed on violently, so violently that Maigret almost went headfirst through the windshield.

"Well, I'm damned!" cried Lecoin.

He looked at his companion with a scowl and grumbled, "I suppose you had it put there?"

In fact, there was a car at exactly the same spot where Jean Vertbois' car had been telescoped the night before. A

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gray one, like the other. It was raining. Pitch dark. The car had no lights on.

And yet the truck had pulled up more than a yard from the sports car.

For a moment the driver's face gave away his rising anger, then he merely growled, "You might have warned me. Supposing I hadn't seen it in time?"

"Don't forget we were chatting all the time."

"So what?"

"Yesterday you were alone. So you could give your undivided attention to driving."

Lecoin shrugged and asked, "Now what do you want me to do?"

"We'll get out. This way. Wait a minute. I want to try an experiment. Call for help."

"What, me?"

"Since the people who shouted yesterday are not here, someone else has to do it."

So Lecoin shouted, very reluctantly, for he sensed a trap. He was even more worried when he heard footsteps and saw the dark outline of a figure moving in the night.

"Come over here!" called Maigret to the newcomer.

It was the boatman of the barge *Belle Thérèse* whom the Inspector had arranged should be brought back by the police, without telling anyone.

"Well?"

"I couldn't swear to it. To me, anyway, it sounded almost the same."

"What?" snarled Lecoin.

"I don't know who shouted, but I can say that it was almost the same sound as yesterday."

At this minute it would not have needed much to make the huge truck driver lose his self-control and go for the boatman, who in fact didn't know what part he was supposed to be playing.

"Get back in the truck!"

Someone came forward, someone who had not moved until then. It was Chief of Police Pillement.

"Everything's all right." Maigret informed him in a whisper. "Now we shall see."

He climbed back into his seat beside Lecoin, who no longer made any effort to appear agreeable.

"Now what do I do?"

"Same as yesterday."

"What, go to Montargis? All right, if that's what you want! I don't know what idea you've got in mind, but if you think I'm mixed up in that business . . ."

They were already passing in front of the Inn of the Drowned where four windows were lit up. Across one of these windows were fixed enamel letters giving the telephone number.

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"So it never occurred to you to stop to use the phone?"

"I've already explained."

"Drive on."

There was a long silence. A scowling man was driving with quick impatient movements, while Maigret sat back in his dark corner, smoking.

So they came to Montargis, then suddenly the Inspector observed, "You've passed it."

"Passed what?"

"The police station."

"That's because of you, with all your talk."

The driver wanted to go back without turning the truck around, for the police station was only about fifty yards back.

"No, no!" protested Maigret. "Go on."

"Go on doing what?"

"Exactly what you did yesterday."

"But I went—"

"You didn't go to the police station straight away. The proof of that is that the times don't coincide. Where's Benoit's filling station?"

"Second turning, on the corner."

"Let's go there."

"What for?"

"Do as I say."

It was an ordinary little filling station standing outside a shop that sold bicycles. There was no light in the shop, but through its window they glimpsed a kitchen where shadows of people were moving about.

The truck had hardly come to a standstill when a man came out of the kitchen; he had obviously heard the engine and the screech of the brakes.

"How many gallons?" he asked, without looking closely at the truck.

A second afterward he recognized it and looked up at Lecoin in surprise.

"What are you doing here? I thought—"

"Put in ten gallons."

Maigret stayed in his corner out of sight of the garage man. Believing himself alone with his friend, Benoit would perhaps talk. But Lecoin realized this danger and was quick to say loudly, "Well, Inspector, is that all you want?"

"Ah, you've got someone with you?" asked Benoit.

"Someone from the police who's making a reconstruction of a crime, or so he says. I don't know a thing about it. It's always people like us they bother, while—"

Having jumped down to the ground, Maigret walked into the shop to the surprise of the owner. Maigret did this because he had seen the man's wife in the room behind the shop.

"Lecoin asks how things are going—" he began, taking a chance.

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She gave him a suspicious look, then leaning over to stare through the window, she asked, "Is Lecoin there?"

"He's getting some gas."

"I hope no one's been upsetting him?"

She was worried and, not knowing what to make of this man who had come into her shop, she walked to the outer door.

It was not possible to see very much. It needed an effort to distinguish people's features.

"I say, Paul—"

This was her husband standing there with both hands occupied, holding the hose of the gas pump.

"Is Lecoin there?"

Maigret calmly finished filling his pipe, then taking advantage of the shelter of the shop, he held a match to it, lighting up the nickel-plated handlebars of the bicycles for a brief moment.

"Are you coming, Paul?"

Then, the Inspector clearly heard one of the two men ask the other, "What shall we do?"

As a precaution, Maigret clutched his revolver, which he kept in his pocket, ready to fire through his coat if necessary. The road was deserted and there was not a light anywhere. And Lecoin was hefty enough to knock down an opponent with a single blow.

"What would *you* do, then?"

The woman still stood in the doorway, hugging her shoulders because of the cold.

Joseph Lecoin climbed down heavily from his seat and took two hesitant steps on the pavement.

"Supposing we go and explain things inside?" Maigret proposed calmly.

"Supposing we go inside and you tell me the truth this time," Maigret suggested to Lecoin, the truck driver, and the gas-station owner and his wife.

It was a modest little home—carved oak sideboard, checkered oilcloth on the table, and, for vases, horrid pink and mauve things which had been won at the fairgrounds.

"Sit down," the woman said quietly, automatically wiping the table in front of Maigret.

Then Benoit took a bottle and four little glasses from the sideboard; he filled them in silence while Lecoin lowered himself astride a chair and rested his elbows on the back.

"So you suspected something?" he said abruptly, looking Maigret straight in the eye.

Maigret nodded. "For two reasons: first, because only a man's cry was heard which was rather strange seeing that there was a girl on the spot. And because, if she had been

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drowned, she was a sufficiently good swimmer to keep afloat for a certain time and call for help.

"Then, after an accident of this kind, nobody drives twelve and a half miles to summon the police when a telephone is handy. The windows of the inn were lit up. It was impossible not to think of that."

"All right," admitted Lecoin. "It was the young man who wanted—"

"He had gone and sat in the truck, of course?"

It was too late to back out now. Moreover, the two men had decided which side they were on in this business, and the woman for her part seemed relieved. It was she who advised, "Better tell him everything. Just for the sake of a paltry two thousand francs we mustn't risk—"

"Let Joseph tell it," interrupted her husband.

After swallowing the contents of his glass, Lecoin began his explanation: "Let's admit things happened just as they did this evening. You were right. In spite of the rain and my bad windshield wiper, I've good enough eyes and good enough brakes not to run into a car standing on the road. I pulled up a yard and a half away.

"I thought it was a breakdown and I got out from my cab to lend a hand. It was then that I noticed an agitated young man who asked me if I'd like to earn two thousand francs."

"By helping him to push the car into the water?" put in Maigret.

"If it came to that, he could have pushed it in on his own. That's what he was trying to do when I arrived. But what he specially wanted was to be driven somewhere without anyone ever knowing where.

"I'm inclined to think now that if there had only been him, I wouldn't have agreed. But there was the girl!"

"Was she still alive?"

"Of course she was! To help me make up my mind, he explained how they weren't allowed to marry, that they loved each other, that they wanted to make people believe they had committed suicide so that no one could find them and separate them.

"I didn't much like the idea of such goings-on but, if you had seen the kid in the rain, poor girl. . . So, to put it briefly, I helped them by pushing the car into the Loing with the truck. The young couple hid in my truck.

"To make things look real, they asked me to call the police, and I did. In that way everyone would think they were dead. Afterwards, all I

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had to do was to drive them into Montargis.

"Another thing was, I realized as we went along, that the young man was no fool. He knew he couldn't stay at a hotel. And he didn't want to catch a train either. He asked me whether I knew anyone who for another two thousand francs would put them up for a few days, just until the investigations were over. I thought of Benoit."

The woman agreed.

"Everybody, including us, thought they were lovers. And so, since our brother-in-law had his room here and since he's away in the army—"

"Are they still in the house?"

"She's not."

"What!"

And Maigret looked about him anxiously.

"In the afternoon," began the cycle-shop owner, "when I saw the newspaper, I went upstairs and asked him whether the story of the body in the trunk was true.

"The girl snatched the paper out of my hands, took one look at it, and then, taking advantage of the open door, ran off."

"Without a coat?"

"Without hat or coat."

"And the young man?"

"He swore he knew nothing about it, that he had just bought the car and that he had not been curious enough to open the trunk."

"Your house has no other way out except this one?"

At that very moment, just as the owner of the cycle shop was shaking his head, the sound of a crash was heard in the street.

Maigret ran outside and found a struggling body lying on the pavement, the body of a young man trying in vain to get away, in spite of the ankle which he had broken in jumping from the second floor.

It was both dramatic and pathetic, for Vertbois was mad with rage and did not yet admit he was beaten.

"If you come near I'll shoot!"

Maigret did not wait but leaped upon him and Vertbois did not shoot, perhaps because he was afraid, perhaps because he had lost his nerve.

"Keep still, now."

The young man turned on the truck driver, the garage owner and his wife, and accused them of having betrayed him.

He was a typical young crook, the kind whom Maigret had had occasion to study only too well. He had met hundreds of specimens—young men with sly envious natures who craved leisure and money so much that they did not hesitate to use any means to obtain them.

"Where's Vivianne?" Maigret asked, handcuffing him.

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"I don't know."

"So you succeeded in persuading her that you were sending the car into the river solely in order to make everyone believe in a lovers' suicide pact?"

"She wouldn't let me out of her sight for a minute."

"Tiresome, isn't it, to be in possession of a body you can't manage to get rid of!"

This was the kind of sordid, stupid, horrible crime that never comes off.

Seeing that his plans for marriage had failed, and that the La Pommeraye money would elude him even if he ran off with Vivianne, Jean Vertbois had attacked his middle-aged mistress, whom he had known for a long time. He persuaded her to go home with him, killed her, stole her money, and using part of this money, bought a second-hand car, planning to get rid of the body in some deserted place.

Then Vivianne appeared on the scene, bringing her young love and passion, a Vivianne who had decided not to return home any more, a Vivianne ready to share the fate of her lover.

And she did not leave him alone for a minute. Time was passing, the car was still speeding along—still carrying the body.

Vivianne thought she was on a honeymoon, but she was really up to her neck in a filthy crime.

While she was embracing the man she loved, he was thinking only about the miserable cargo which he had to get rid of at all costs.

Then it was, in desperation, he thought up this fake suicide which the chance arrival of a truck helped and yet made even more involved.

"The information you promised us, Inspector?"

At La Cloche the journalists had eaten a meal which was something of a banquet and this was reflected in their mood.

"The murderer of Marthe Dorval is in the hospital."

"Marthe Dorval?"

"A former musical comedy actress who had some money put aside and who was Jean Vertbois' mistress."

"He's in the hospital?"

"At Montargis, with a broken ankle. I give you permission to go and take his picture and ask him all the questions you like."

"But the girl?"

Maigret hung his head. Of her he knew nothing and he was afraid she might have done something desperate.

It was past midnight. The In-

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spector had gone to see Chief of Police Pillement, again in his house in Nemours, and was chatting about the events when they heard the telephone ringing.

As he stood listening, the Chief's expression changed to one of pleasurable surprise, and he asked a few questions.

"Are you sure of the address? Listen. Just to be quite sure, bring the taxi driver to me. It doesn't matter if he's drunk—"

And he explained to Maigret: "My men have just found a taxi driver from Montargis who during the course of the day had a hatless and coatless girl as one of his fares. She had herself driven into the country, near Bourges, where she went to a small house miles from anywhere. As the driver was afraid of not getting his money —seeing that his passenger did not even have a handbag with her—she kept on saying to him throughout the journey, 'My aunt will pay . . .' "

In fact, Vivianne La Pommeraye, shivering and in a state of collapse, had taken refuge with an aunt with whom she had spent her vacations since her childhood.

(Translated by Mary Scudamore)

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a *NEW* "Man Who" story by

WILLIAM BRITTAIN

"Art imitates Nature" was first said more than 300 years ago. It was probably true then, is probably true now. But there are circumstances in which Nature imitates Art. Case in point: Barney was an Inspector Maigret fan. He read every Simenon-Maigret book he could lay his hands on. So, naturally, when the right circumstances turned up, Barney, standing in for Nature, made like Maigret, standing in for Art . . .

THE MAN WHO READ GEORGES SIMENON

by WILLIAM BRITTAIN

With a hiss of air from its brakes the gigantic tractor-trailer rig with LINTEN VAN LINES emblazoned across each side in brilliant orange came to a stop at the edge of the narrow road. The driver was a hulk of a man whose lumpy, battered face resembled a culturally deprived beanbag. He took a last drag on his cigarette, then threw the butt out the window.

"I think this is the place, Barney," he said. "Only I don't see no house. Just that fancy sign with Bannering's name on it on the post next to the driveway."

His companion, short and wiry, closed the book he had been reading. He brushed a lock of flaming red hair back into place and regarded the driver through watery blue eyes.

"You ain't gonna see no houses along this stretch, Harold," he said. "This here's rich people country. And rich people build their houses back from the road so's they don't have to watch the traffic go by. Just go on up the driveway there and lemme get back to my reading."

There was a grinding of gears as Harold shifted into low.

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"Barney," he said, revving the motor, "how come you're always readin' them books when you ain't driving? I mean the guys on the other runs talk about girls and sports and things, but all you do when I'm at the wheel is read them dumb books."

Barney looked at the cover of the book as if seeing it for the first time. "This book ain't dumb," he replied. "It's about a very smart cookie. A detective. Maigret's his moniker."

"Maigret, huh? That's a funny name, especially for a detective."

"He's a Frenchman, stupid. And he's really got brains. 'Course I feel sorry for him in some of the stories. His feet are always hurting, or he gets wet from standing in the rain. Not like some of these detectives in books who act like they're Superman. But he sure does know what makes people tick. He solves a lot of his crimes more by knowing how people act than from putting a lot of clues together."

"A lot of his crimes?" Harold glanced at Barney. "How many books are there about this guy?"

"I dunno. I've read a couple dozen of 'em already. I figure if you do your share of the driving I ought to be finished with this one by the time we dump this load and make the trip back to Jersey. It's real good. *Maigret's Boyhood Friend,* it's called. Y'know, Maigret's the only detective I heard of who ever was a kid. All the rest of 'em—"

"There's the house," Harold interrupted. "Looks like a castle through the trees, don't it?"

"Yeah. I wonder what you have to do to get the bread to buy a place like that." Barney closed the book and put it on the sleeping compartment behind the seat.

Harold parked the rig expertly so that its rear doors were next to the marble steps of the house. "I'll go see if this Lightfoot Larry guy we're supposed to meet is around," said Barney, opening the door and climbing down. "If not, we're gonna have to take the load back, because he's holding the only key to the padlock on the trailer doors."

He went up the steps and pressed the doorbell. He could hear the chimes ringing inside. Moments later the door was opened by a man with an athlete's wide shoulders and narrow hips. The man wore a green corduroy jacket with large pockets and tight brown trousers; the legs of the trousers were tucked into oversize bright red cowboy boots onto which had been stitched pieces

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of colored leather—irregular shapes of yellow and orange, turquoise green, and electric blue—to form a brilliant design all over the sides of the boots.

Expensive, thought Barney. Just like everything else about this place.

"You gotta be Lightfoot Larry Schofield," Barney said aloud. "Mr. Bannering said I'd be able to recognize you because of the cowboy boots."

"That's me," said the man. "I just got here a little while ago myself. The bus was late, and then I couldn't find a taxi from town. Had to walk the whole way—almost two miles."

"Things are tough all over," shrugged Barney. He looked curiously at Schofield's left jacket-pocket. "You packin' a rod?" he asked curiously.

"Of course I am. That truck of yours contains the entire Maurice Bannering art collection. When Mr. Bannering bought this place he asked me to come on ahead to see that it got here safely and that nothing happened to it. Suppose somebody broke in here after the objects were delivered? My orders are to protect these things until Mr. Bannering arrives, and that's just what I intend to do."

"Okay, Schofield, okay," said Barney, holding up his hands in a gesture of peace. "Keep your shirt on. We're bonded drivers, and this load is insured to the hilt. We're just making a delivery. We don't plan on stealin' anything. Now how about coming out and unlocking the rig for us?"

Schofield reached into a pocket and brought out a key which he tossed to Barney. "Here, do it yourselves. You guys were hired to unload those things, not me. And wipe your shoes before you come inside. The whole house has just had very expensive carpeting laid down, and I don't want to see your dirty footprints on it when you're finished."

Barney returned to the rig and motioned Harold to get out. "That Schofield's a real charmer," he said, unsnapping the heavy padlock on the rear doors. 'Wipe your shoes,' he says to me, like I ain't never carted nothing into nobody's house before. Ah, well, maybe he's just nervous because he's responsible for all them high-priced pictures and statues and junk we brought."

On his first trip into the house Harold carried a flat object, carefully crated. As he entered, the crate banged loudly against the side of the doorway.

"You imbecile!" Schofield yelled. "Unpack that thing so I can see if there's any damage."

Harold brought a hammer

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from the toolbox under the seat and with a screeching of nails and rustling of excelsior released the object from its wooden case.

"See, it ain't even scratched," said Harold. "Besides, it's just a picture. Not very good, at that. A line here and a blotch of color there. My kid makes better ones all the time."

"That's a genuine Miro," replied Schofield. "And if it had been harmed, you'd have spent the rest of your life paying for it. Now please be more careful. The jade pieces in particular are very fragile."

The next item, a large painting, was brought in without incident, Barney and Harold carrying it between them. "Put the larger things in there," said Schofield, pointing toward a room off the magnificent entrance hall. "The painter has been working in there, so don't kick over any of his cans."

Mumbling unprintables under his breath, Barney led Harold into the indicated room. They set the crate gently on the floor and flexed aching fingers.

"Heavy," said Harold.

"Yeah." Barney considered the room's opposite wall in front of which lay a wild array of dropcloths, paint cans, and stained rags. "Hey, look. Don't that seem funny to you?"

"Nah, I kind of like yellow."

"No, I mean the way the painter's doin' it. He quit right in the middle of the wall."

Schofield appeared in the doorway. "You two are being paid to unload that truck outside," he said. "Not comment on the décor."

"If I was Mr. Bannering I'd get somebody else to do this room," said Barney. "Any painter worth his salt quits at a corner or an edge somewhere. As it is, when he starts again you'll have a lap mark where the new paint dries over the stuff already on the wall."

"That's none of your business. Just get back to unloading the truck."

"Okay. But when Mr. Bannering gets here, you tell him Barney Joplin says he's being gypped on the paint job."

As they left the room, Harold padded across the thick carpeting with exaggerated steps, like a child feeling sand underfoot for the first time. "Geez, it's like walkin' on sponges," he said with a broad smile. "How much do you suppose it cost to have the whole house done this way, Barney?"

"You couldn't afford it," was the answer. "This is rich people carpet. C'mon, let's get going."

For the next two hours the men unloaded the truck, with Schofield standing just inside the doorway with a clipboard

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full of papers, checking each crate as it passed into the house. Finally the trailer, as large as a small house, was empty.

"I'll sign the delivery slip now," said Schofield to a perspiring Barney. "Then you two can be on your way."

"Now just a second," said Barney. "Maybe you don't know it, but me and Harold have been working damn hard to get this stuff in here. And you weren't much help, just hanging around inside with a wad of papers all the time. Would it break your heart to give us a beer and let us sit in a soft chair for a few minutes and grab a rest?" He looked about the room, which was empty except for the crates from the truck.

"I'll even settle for lying down on that nice soft rug, seein' as the furniture ain't arrived yet," he concluded.

"Well, I—" Schofield paused, then shrugged. "I can't do anything about the beer," he said finally. "There's none in the house. However, there's some odd furniture in the den that the previous owner left. You can rest there, I suppose. But I'll have to keep an eye on you."

"Fine. C'mon, Harold. The beer can wait until we get back on the road."

Schofield led them to the den where Harold flopped down onto an old leather couch and Barney took an easy chair, stretching his feet out with a groan of contentment. Schofield himself sat bolt upright in an upholstered chair large enough to have been a throne. Barney kicked a footstool toward him, but Schofield ignored it.

"What kind of training do you need before somebody like Bannering hires you to guard his stuff?" asked Barney.

"Let's just say I could kill you with my bare hands with no effort at all," answered Schofield. "And if your partner tried anything, he'd be dead with a bullet between the eyes before he got his feet off the couch and onto the floor."

"Yeah, Mr. Bannering told us you weren't anybody to mess around with," said Barney. "Well, we ain't gonna try and steal any of his precious pictures and stuff. So relax, Mr. Schofield. Put your feet up and let's get a closer look at them cowboy boots you always wear."

Schofield shook his head, keeping his feet planted firmly on the floor.

"Barney, maybe we oughta get goin'," said Harold. "If we want to make Jersey by tomorrow night, we can't sit around here too much longer."

"Just a little while more,"

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said Barney. "Y'know, I'm beginnin' to feel just the way Maigret does in the stories."

"Maigret? Who's that?" asked Schofield.

"He's an Inspector with the Paris police," answered Barney. "A guy named Georges Simenon writes books about him. I started readin' them because—well, they were about France and all. The Bronx ain't too exotic a place to come from, if you know what I mean."

"But you said you were beginning to feel like him," said Harold. "What did you mean by that?"

"Well, Maigret ain't always so sure that what seems to have happened in a crime is what really did happen. All you have to do is read *Maigret Hesitates* or *Maigret's Mistake* to see that. But I've got a hunch we'd be making a bad mistake by leaving this house right now."

"Don't worry," said Schofield. "I'm capable of guarding this place until Mr. Bannering and his staff arrive."

"I'll bet you are. Man, I wish you'd relax, Mr. Schofield. You ain't shifted position since we sat down here."

"I'd be happy to see you to the door any time you say. Or do you insist on continuing with this Maigret business?"

"Yeah, I think I will," said Barney, crossing his legs. He reached into a box next to his chair and removed a glass paperweight in which a glittering stone was embedded. "Did I ever tell you I used to pitch on a baseball team, Mr. Schofield? Oh, it was only semipro, but I was good, real good. Fact is, I think I could bounce this thing off your noggin before you made the first move toward that gun in your jacket pocket. Harold, go over and take that thing away from him before it goes off and hurts somebody."

Harold hauled himself up from the sofa, gave Barney one odd glance, then walked to Schofield's chair. He half expected Schofield to strike out at him, but the man remained still, his eyes flashing angrily. Gingerly Harold removed the .38 revolver.

"Okay, Harold, now sit down and keep that thing aimed at him. I don't think Mr. Schofield here is as good at fighting as he says he is, but let's not take any chances. I wouldn't get out of that chair if I was you, Mr. Schofield. Harold is very nervous around guns and there's no tellin' what he'd do if you was to get him excited."

"I have no intention of moving," said Schofield. "If you're going to steal the pictures, go ahead. Although why you didn't just drive off when you had

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them in the truck, I—"

"Come off it, Schofield. We ain't gonna steal nothing. We was just talkin' about Inspector Maigret, remember?"

"Well, what about him?"

"I was sayin' to Harold earlier, Maigret don't spend all his time going around scraping clues into little envelopes the way Sherlock Holmes and them other detectives do. He understands people and the way they think and feel. That's the way he solves his crimes. Like now, Mr. Schofield, the sweat's pouring out of you like a fountain. So I know you're scared. See what I mean? Why in *Maigret and the Burglar's Wife* there's a part where—"

"Cut the fancy stuff. You'd be scared too, with a pistol pointed at you. And if you're not after the paintings, would you mind telling me what's all this talk about crimes and detectives?"

"Okay. Two days ago Maurice Bannering talked to us personally before he shipped them pictures and things. He told us we'd be met here by a man he called Lightfoot Larry Schofield. Said we'd know him at a glance because he'd be wearing wild-looking cowboy boots. They were kind of his trademark."

"Well, that's me. So what?"

"The thing is, he never showed us a photograph of Lightfoot Larry. All we had to go on was the boots."

"Look, give me a few days and I'll send you a hundred photographs. All autographed."

"But if I'm right in what I'm thinking, you'd be signing the wrong name even if you was to make good on the pictures. Y'see, I dunno who you are. But the one person I think you're *not* is Lightfoot Larry Schofield."

Harold almost dropped the pistol. "Hey, Barney," he said. "You gone nuts or something?"

"I don't think so, Harold. What about his name? 'Lightfoot Larry.' But your feet are about as big as a couple of rowboats, Mr. Schofield or whoever you are. You don't look like no lightfoot to me."

"The name 'Lightfoot' has to do with my boots, not my feet. Bright leather—therefore Lightfoot."

"Y'know, you're pretty clever," said Barney. "I never thought of that. But then there's the paint job that's being done in the other room."

"Well, what about it?"

"No real painter who knew his business would stop in the middle of the wall that way. But let's say it wasn't a painter, but somebody who wanted to get into this house while the real Lightfoot Larry was here. One man alone

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couldn't force his way in. Schofield, from what Mr. Bannering said, would have broken him in two. But if a 'painter' showed up at the door, complete with buckets and dropcloths —in a house that the owner hadn't even moved into yet— Schofield would let him in without a suspicion in the world. The man would have to start painting, of course, to make his disguise look real. But he'd stop painting wherever he was when he had his first chance to hit Schofield over the head when he wasn't looking.

"Now, if things happened that way, it wouldn't be too hard for the 'painter' to tie up the real Schofield and stash him in a closet somewhere. Then he could put on Schofield's clothing, and when us dumb drivers came with the paintings, he could see 'em all delivered and then, when the truck had left, he'd have all the time in the world to get them all out of here."

"I find your theory absolutely ridiculous," came the reply. "So now, to prove myself innocent, I suppose you want me either to let you search the whole house for the man I'm supposed to be impersonating or else allow you to hold me at gunpoint for a couple of days until Mr. Bannering arrives from halfway across the country to identify me. No way, Mr. Barney Joplin. You tell your friend there to give me my gun and get the hell out of here, otherwise I'm going to call the police right now and have a good laugh while they cart you off to the loony farm."

Barney shook his head. "We're probably way out of line treating you this way, Mr. Schofield. And if I'm wrong about what I said, I wouldn't blame you for being plenty sore. But me and Maigret, we're great ones for wondering *why* people act in a certain way. Like right now, I'm wondering why you don't move around much. You don't cross your legs or put your feet up on a stool, or nothin'. You sit there like there was a poker up your back even though that easy chair just begs to be snuggled in. And you was acting that way even before Harold took your gun, so he ain't the reason. It must be somethin' else, huh?"

"Why, I—"

"Y'see, it seems to me that if you was to cook up this little scheme, the one thing of the real Lightfoot Larry Schofield you couldn't wear would be them boots. There couldn't be too many men around with feet as big as yours. You'd have to buy a pair just like his, with all that fancy stitchin', to make your plan work. Oh, it wouldn't

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have been hard to smuggle 'em in under the painting equipment and put 'em on after you slugged the real Schofield.

"But if the boots was brand-new—bought and kept for just this occasion—the only place you'd have walked in 'em would be on the carpets inside this house. You didn't even go outside to help us open the truck. So the boots would still have shiny leather on the bottoms. On the other hand, if you're really Schofield, and you walked a couple of miles out here from town like you said, the soles of the boots would be scraped and scuffed up some.

"So there you are, Mr. Schofield or whoever. I think you've kept the bottoms of the boots flat on the carpet so we wouldn't get a look at 'em and see how shiny they are. If you'd put your feet up on the stool or even crossed your legs you'd have given your whole game away. So we haven't got to wait any time at all to see whether you're the real McCoy or not. Just put your feet up on the footstool here while we take a gander at the boot bottoms. If they're scuffed, we'll be on our way. But if they're shiny you've got quite a bit of explainin' to do."

Barney shoved the footstool in front of the seated man. "Up with the feet," he said. "Harold, if he makes a false move, shoot him anywhere you think it'll do the most good."

Slowly, first one boot and then the other were raised and settled on the footstool. Harold sat up straighter and blinked twice.

He could almost see his own reflection in the gleaming boot soles.

Several hours and many telephone calls later the police had identified the fake Schofield as Willie Needleman, a former employee of Bannerman's who had been dismissed for dipping into the petty-cash fund. They found the real Schofield trussed up in a closet on the second floor. Two policemen were left to guard the art treasures until Bannerman could make his own arrangements for protecting them. And the tractor-trailer rig was cruising back toward New Jersey with Harold at the wheel.

From time to time he glanced at Barney, who was again reading Maigret's adventures with rapt concentration. But now Barney was making motions with his free hand which, to say the least, were puzzling.

In spite of the fact that Barney was bare-headed and had nothing in his mouth, he seemed to be adjusting a hat and curving his fingers around the bowl of a pipe.

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST VERSE

Gloria Nowak describes herself as "an ordinary middle-aged wife." She has worked in "various phases of advertising, including copy writing." Her hobbies include "enjoying music and good mystery stories"; also swimming and chess, "both with more enthusiasm than skill." She has lived in big-cities all her life—until last year. Now she and her husband, a retired artist, own and operate "the only gem-quality fire-opal mine in California". . .

I.O.U. ONE STORY

by GLORIA NOWAK

I would consider it, I'm sure,
The ultimate of glories
If I could see my name in your
Department of First Stories.
Now I decided long ago
To write a tale of crime,
But here's instead my tale of woe
Converted into rhyme.
While I have read your books a lot,
Though mostly just for fun,
I just can't think of any plot
That's not already done!
I marvel at each brand-new tale
Appearing on your list,
Because the writer didn't fail
To find a different twist.
Like: While no one could find the key,
The victim met his doom,

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And yet the murderer could flee
From out the locked-up room!
Or else the bank clerk used his brain
To run off with the dough,
And then some crook hijacked the plane
En route to Mexico!
But all *my* stories have their flaws;
My amateur detective
Can't solve the simplest crime because
His logic is defective!
But I will find some story line
To send you, Mr. Queen,
And hope to see it in your fine
Detective magazine.
So now I'll switch to writing prose,
And mail it in some day,
And if I should succeed, it shows
That crime will sometimes pay!

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

In this issue we bring you two "first stories"—numbers 418 and 419 published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. Both stories were written by teen-agers, and while they are completely different from each other, they have one thing in common—a surprisingly strong psychological approach for writers still in their teens . . .

The first of the two first stories is by Terry Sakamoto, a 15-year-old Canadian. At the time he wrote "Split Personality," Terry was a "student at a junior high school and considering a law career." He is "a great mystery fan" and much of his leisure time is spent in collecting detective books. His other hobbies include bicycle riding and going to the movies—he calls himself "a fantastic movie buff" . . .

SPLIT PERSONALITY

by TERRY SAKAMOTO

Dr. Edward Carlisle, the famous psychological theorizer, ushered the young lady into his office. After he had settled her in a chair Carlisle picked up his notebook and prepared to take notes. He cleared his throat and began, "Miss Riley—Jane, is it?—yes; well, Jane, since this is your first time with me I think we should get right down to brass tacks. Exactly what is your problem?"

"Well, I don't know just how to tell you about this," the pretty young lady said. "I think it's called a persecution complex. That's when you feel that somebody is following you and watching you and like that, right? Well, my problem is like that. I have this funny feeling somebody is trying to kill me."

"Ah," said Dr. Carlisle. "And how do you know this?"

"Well, I just have this feeling about it, you know, and I've had some narrow escapes since I've started feeling this way."

"Um-hm," said Dr. Carlisle, nodding.

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"And once I even *saw* my would-be killer—"

"You did?" exclaimed Dr. Carlisle. "And what did your assailant look like?"

"Well, she—she," stuttered Jane, forcing the words out, "she looked a lot like me."

"You?" Dr. Carlisle said, quizzically.

"Yes. When I first saw her there wasn't much doubt about the resemblance—"

"Uh—let's get back to the beginning, shall we?" interrupted the doctor. "When did you first experience this—er—complex?"

Jane paused and thought back. "Well, it was about four days ago at a fancy party a friend of mine was throwing. In the midst of all the excitement somebody pushed a drink into my hand while I was talking to an acquaintance, and when I turned to see who had done it, he or she was gone. I was about to take a sip from the glass when suddenly someone else bumped into me, making me drop my glass. The contents spilled on the floor and my friend's cat came to lick it up. He had only been licking at it for a few moments when he fell over dead on the floor." Jane paused, gulping with emotion. "When the doctor analyzed the body, he said its stomach was full of—of cyanide." She began to tremble.

"There, there," said Dr. Carlisle comfortingly, "try not to think about it." Time to change tactics, he thought. "What about the time you saw your murderer? What happened then?"

"Well, I remember I was walking home from work one night and as I entered a dimly lit area of the street, suddenly I heard something whiz past my head. When I looked around I found a knife. I remember how cold and sharp the blade was. I started to move slowly and quietly away, and then I heard the sound of someone running. I turned, and at the street lamp I saw a female figure dart into the light for a moment. I could see her face clearly. It was astonishing! She was almost my exact double. In fact, under any other circumstances, I would have been prepared to swear she was me!"

Dr. Carlisle looked at her. "Jane, is there anyone who stands to gain from your death?"

"No. I have no relatives and my income is barely enough to make ends meet."

"Any boy friends?"

"No. And before you ask, no one in the past. Men just naturally

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stay clear of me. They think I'm an iceberg."

"So there is no reason for *anyone* to want to kill you?"

"No."

"Then, Miss Riley, it is time for me to tell you that your game is over. No one has ever tried to kill you, least of all someone who looked like you. This whole story of yours is a fabrication."

Jane stood up, outraged. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"Nothing but, Miss Riley. If you were any other person I might have believed you. But you are obviously quite sane, and you yourself would not believe a story as preposterous as this."

Jane looked fiercely at him.

"Obviously," Dr. Carlisle continued, "you must be either lying or telling the truth. If the latter, then some real killer is stalking you, and neither the knife nor the poisoned cat would be figments of your imagination. But you told me that you have absolutely no enemies, that there's no one who would want you dead. So obviously you must be lying."

"Assuming all you say is true, Doctor," said Jane coldly, "what possible reason would I have for such a ridiculous hoax?"

"I'm not sure. But from your appearance I would guess you are a student of some university and perhaps you are playing out this farce as an initiation to a sorority."

"Well! If that is your final word in the matter, Doctor, I think I shall have to find someone who does believe in my problem."

"By all means do so, Miss Riley. Good day."

"Good day," she said icily, and left.

Foolish girl, thought Dr. Carlisle. Of course her story was a hoax. No personality could possibly detach itself from a human psyche and develop individual characteristics. Even if it did, it would be utterly inconceivable that the personality would develop a hatred of its originator and plot to destroy it.

Suddenly from outside there was a scream and a screeching of brakes. Quickly Dr. Carlisle ran over to the open window and peered out. On the street below lay Jane Riley, unmoving. With a tinge of fear Carlisle moved back to his desk and phoned the doorman downstairs. "What happened?" he asked.

"Hit-and-run, sir," the doorman replied. "Just as this lady was crossin' the street, another lady in a car came roaring up and picked her off like a bowling pin."

"Did you see who was driving the car? What did she look like?"

"Well, sir," said the doorman hesitantly, "I can't be sure now

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but at the time of the accident I thought she looked a lot like that lady who got hit. You know, there was a kind of a resemblance."

"Thanks," said Dr. Carlisle in a dead voice, and walked back to the window. Peering out again, he felt a deep sadness pass through him.

"I think," said Dr. Carlisle to himself, "that my theory about a detached personality needs a few revisions."

"I quite agree with you," said Dr. Carlisle, behind him, and pushed him out the window.

The author of the second "first story" is David Jones, who lives in Michigan. At the time he wrote "The Intruder," David was a 19-year-old freshman in college. He does most of his writing "while not playing chess, or fishing, or reading." His first story was written, he informed us, "after an overdose (of some eight years) of Poe" . . .

You may recall that in our October 1974 issue, only three months ago, we gave you a crime story complete in less than 200 words—Jane Speed's "Recipe for Revenge." David Jones's story is almost as short—approximately 250 words . . .

THE INTRUDER

by DAVID JONES

Let us not prattle. You have little time for banality, nor do I love my own words so much. I will be brief.

I killed a man by incineration. It was quick, clean, and final. His ashes are mingled with a thousand others in the ashpan of my apartment's stove.

He had become impossible to live with. That was my motive. It was not possible to abide him one moment longer.

While I doubt that you are a writer, surely you know the agonies of those who do write? The creators who must devote

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their undivided, unrivaled souls to the crafting of words? I am, or perhaps soon would be, a writer. My enemy was a parasite.

Deep in a dialogue much profounder than these words, he would intrude and ask for a cup of tea. On the brink of a sentence capturing the cosmos, this cretin would demand my attention to a joke. Ever nearby he would pounce on my every pause and seduce me from my typewriter.

Locked doors, uncradled telephone, ignored mail, and shaded windows did not prevent his insidious entries. With devilish wile the man would cast his voice through my protective shells until I once nearly accepted his voice as my own.

At last I struck back. You should not imagine that any foolish claims of humanity stayed my hand. No. I performed my pyrotechnics of revolution without a qualm. And I do not for a second regret it.

Let us not prattle. I tore the man out of my typewriter, crumpled him, and hurled him into the fire.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDBOUNDS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Claudia, Susan	CLOCK & BELL	Doubleday Crime Club	$4.95	12/6
Creasey, John	SECRET ERRAND	McKay-Washburn	5.95	12/2
Hensley, Joe L.	SONG OF CORPUS JURIS	Doubleday Crime Club	4.95	12/13
Marric, J.J.	GIDEON'S FOG	Harper & Row	5.95	12/11
Rippon, Marion	THE NINTH TENTACLE	Doubleday Crime Club	4.95	12/13

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a *NEW* novelet by

JOYCE HARRINGTON

The story of Mirabelle MacMaster, who stood six foot three in her worn sneakers; a heavy woman, but not fat; with features that resembled a blurred lunar landscape; a woman amazingly strong in many ways. And Mirabelle had an unusual vocation: she was a worm farmer; she raised night crawlers.

A story of texture and substance; of repression, greed, cruelty, hate, meanness, and of a treasure trove in the side of the hill, the side away from the house, the town, and the river . . .

"Mirabelle's worms were famous in the valley for being fresh, lively, and long-lived . . . Just like six coffins in a row with worms busy inside . . . But Mirabelle's heart was ice, too" . . .

NIGHT CRAWLERS

by JOYCE HARRINGTON

"Oh, he's laughing at me again. Can you hear him, little ones? Haw, haw, haw. Thinks he's so funny."

Mirabelle squatted beside the long wooden box and unhooked the wire mesh screen that covered it. Gently she raised the lid and propped it back against the cellar wall.

"Why don't you get married, that's what he said. Past time you got married. You and Catfish Charlie would make a good pair. And then he laughed like a loony. Big joke. He's still laughing. Can you hear him, little ones?"

Mirabelle cried fat clumsy tears that dripped off her chin and plopped into the rich peaty earth in the long wooden box. She drummed rhythmically with large-knuckled fingers on one side of the box.

"Oh, I told him, though. I could of got married, I said. Years ago. I could of married Roger Sprouse. He wanted to marry me. And do you know what he said, little ones? He said Roger Sprouse

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must of been half blind as well as half witted. And if he wasn't, then he must of been after the money."

Mirabelle's drumming soothed her and she stopped crying. Small clods of earth in the box began to shift delicately. Three or four glistening pink cylinders emerged from dark burrows. They wavered upright, momentarily blinded in the dim cellar light. Then together they hunched and wriggled toward the source of the compelling thrum. Mirabelle stopped drumming and picked up the longest worm. The others tumbled about in a tangled directionless heap.

"There you are, little one," Mirabelle crooned. "Aren't you a pretty little one? You'll never laugh at me, will you? Maybe I will marry Catfish Charlie. He wouldn't think it was so funny if I did. Roger Sprousé wasn't good enough for *his* daughter. Nobody was good enough for Lewis MacMaster's daughter or Lewis MacMaster's money."

Mirabelle MacMaster cradled the worm gently in her strong hands. Its long reddish-pink body coiled and undulated, seeking escape from the imprisoning fingers. Mirabelle tenderly wound the worm around her third finger left hand and admired the effect. She thought of the day twenty years ago when she'd told her father of Roger Sprouse's intentions. Roger had been a bit leery of speaking for himself and wanted Mirabelle to elope with him. Now she wished she had. But at the time she simply couldn't run off and leave her crippled father alone in the big old house on the hill overlooking the river. So she'd told him. She could still hear the scornful words.

"Roger Sprouse? That little runt? Why, girl, he's a foot shorter than you. And besides he's nobody. No job, no money, no family. Face it, Mirabelle. You're a great big homely soft-hearted booby. And if you think Roger Sprouse is attracted by anything more than my disability money, well, you're dumber than I thought. You just wait, girl. The right fellow will come along. Just be patient. Roger Sprouse, hah!"

He'd laughed then, an ugly derisive laugh. And he'd been laughing at her for twenty years. Because, of course, no other fellow had ever come along after she sadly told Roger she couldn't marry him. Roger had left the valley and she never heard from him. She did occasionally hear rumors that he was working the oilfields in Texas or trapping in Alaska. But never once did he write to her.

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Mirabelle sighed and uncoiled the worm from her finger. She placed it gently back in the long box. The other worms had burrowed back into the crumbly earth and now this one did the same.

"Feed time, little ones." She rose achingly to her feet, her legs cramped and tingling from squatting so long beside the worm box. Mirabelle MacMaster stood six foot three in her worn sneakers, but lost a few inches to the discouraged stoop of her shoulders. She wore a shapeless home-made cotton smock and no stockings. It was hard to find ready-made clothes to fit. She was a heavy woman, but not fat, and her arms and legs seemed to grow out of the smock like the limbs of a smooth, patient beast. Her face hung round and high in the cellar gloom, a full moon shining down on the row of worm boxes. Her features resembled a blurred lunar landscape—a craggy jutting nose, round heavy chin, dark eyes set deep in bony craters. Her long brown hair, threaded with gray, was pulled back and carelessly braided into a lopsided wad at the back of her head.

"Feed time, little ones. And then I'll have to go and feed *him*." She sloped dejectedly to a sawhorse table under the high cellar window where she kept the feed cans, an assortment of tools, and the polystyrene container of worms that were scoured and ready for sale to the fishermen who tried for catfish and bass in the muddy brown river that curled through the valley. Mirabelle's worms were famous in the valley for being fresh, lively, and long-lived.

From the row of old coffee cans on the table she selected one, removed the lid, and sniffed. It was a mixture of cornmeal, coffee grounds, and brown sugar.

"Smells good, little ones. Nice and fresh and sweet."

As she filled a coarse mesh strainer with the cornmeal mixture, she listened for sounds of activity from above. He'll be finished with the evening paper soon, she thought. He'll be rolling through the house soon, yelling for his supper. It was a thing he did every evening. For that matter, yelling was a thing she did every evening. It was a thing they did to each other, and neither one of them could stop doing it. It was the way the long hateful days ended.

Every evening after Mirabelle got him up from his afternoon nap and settled in his wheelchair with the evening paper and a light whiskey and water, and the table set, and supper simmering on the stove, she would go down to the cellar and tend to the worms. And there she would stay until he yelled for her to come

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up. If he didn't yell, she wouldn't come up. Once she stayed down there all night because he wouldn't yell. She'd slept on the dirt floor next to the row of worm boxes, and he'd had to spend the night in his wheelchair. At least, that's what he said. The supper had burned to a sticky black mess and Mirabelle had to throw her best stew pot away. But it was worth it to let him know that she was her own person and had something more to do in life besides care for him. After that he yelled for her to come up. Every night.

Mirabelle shook and tapped the strainer over each worm box so that the black earth was covered with a light sprinkling of the cornmeal mixture. Then with a rake she mixed the feed gently and thoroughly through the dirt until none remained on top. In each box she felt the soil and crumbled it between her fingers to make sure it was damp enough, but not too damp.

Before she had finished with the sixth and last box, she heard the faint rumble overhead. The wheelchair was moving from the front parlor into the hall. She heard the floorboards creak. She heard the wheels trundle down the uncarpeted hall. Now he was passing through the dining room, in one door, the wheels muffled by the worn carpet, out the other door and into the kitchen.

Mirabelle paused in her raking of the last box, and her eyes followed the path of the wheelchair over her head. Into the kitchen now, so close she could hear the rubber squeaking on the slick linoleum. Any minute now he would yell. Mirabelle held her breath and peered up the cellar stairs to where she knew he was lurking on the other side of the cellar door.

At last it came. "Mirabelle! Hey, down there! How about some supper? Mirabelle, you gonna stay down there all night?"

Satisfied, she called back, "Coming, Pa." And went back to raking the feed into the last box. She took her time about it, muttering to the worms that popped up as she turned the earth over. "I'd like to put some of you into his supper. That's what. That would be a good joke on him. See if he laughs at that. Worms in his supper. Supper's ready, Pa. Worm soup tonight. Come and get it."

She finished raking and then went round to all the boxes checking to be sure the screens were tightly hooked so that no worms could escape to burrow into the dirt floor of the cellar. She stood back to admire the neat row of boxes. Six in a row, she thought, filled with hundreds of shiny healthy night crawlers munching away at their tasty supper. Just like six coffins in a row with worms busy inside.

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Mirabelle turned and trudged up the cellar steps.

"You're a good cook, Mirabelle. I have to give you that. Not much to look at, but a good cook."

The old man scraped away at the last speck of gravy on his plate with a crust of bread. He crammed the bread into his thin-lipped mouth and his jaws chomped noisily up and down.

Mirabelle picked daintily at her food and thought of the worms below. Hundreds of tiny jaws chomping up and down at their cornmeal supper.

She said, "Thank you, Pa."

There came a scratching at the screen door leading from the kitchen to the back porch.

"Must be your beau. Ask him in, Mirabelle. Give him a piece of your chocolate cake, and maybe he'll pop the question. Cut me a piece while you're at it."

Mirabelle cut a piece of cake and placed it before the old man.

"It's only Charlie come for some worms."

"Just what I mean, girl. You got old Catfish hooked. Better not let this one get away. Haw, haw."

"You're plain loony, Pa." Mirabelle rose from the scarred table and left the shabby dining room. Through the immense old-fashioned kitchen she went, past the black iron stove for which she chopped and stacked wood, all the way through to the back door.

"Hello, Charlie."

"Evenin', Miss Mirabelle. I come for some worms."

Mirabelle held the door open for him, and the tall gaunt figure sidled into the house. No one knew how old Catfish Charlie was or where he came from. He lived in a one-room shack down near the bend in the river. Had lived there as long as anyone could remember. He always looked the same, a little bit like a catfish with his long turned-down mouth and his straggly mustache and round stubbled chin. Somewhere along the way the mustache and stubble had turned gray. Summer and winter he always wore the same old greasy knitted wool cap, so no one knew if his hair had turned gray, or even if he had any.

Charlie was the best fisherman on the river, but he only bothered to catch enough to fry for his supper and a few over to sell for tobacco and bait money. Between times he did odd jobs around town—shoveling snow in the winter, cleaning leaves out

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of gutters and rain spouts in the fall.

"I could use about a dollar's worth," he said in a soft whisper.

"Come on down cellar, Charlie."

Mirabelle opened the cellar door and started down the rickety steps.

The old man's voice rasped at them from the dining room.

"You mind your p's and q's down there, Catfish. Don't you go taking no liberties with my little girl. Else I'll take my shotgun after you. Haw, haw, haw."

Charlie froze at the top of the cellar steps. Mirabelle turned and saw the fright in his faded blue eyes.

"Don't pay him no mind, Charlie. He's just teasing."

Still Charlie hesitated at the top of the stairs, shifting from one foot to the other, getting ready to bolt if the wheelchair started rumbling toward the kitchen.

"Come on, Charlie. I got some real good wigglers. Saved 'em special for you. Besides, he ain't even got no shotgun."

"You sure?"

"Sure I'm sure."

"Well, all right then."

Charlie followed her, trembling, down into the cellar.

While Mirabelle dipped into the styrene container, counting out worms and packing them into an old cottage-cheese carton, Charlie paced nervously up and down the row of worm boxes.

"I heard something, Miss Mirabelle."

"Did you now, Charlie."

"I heard something and I'm gonna tell it to you."

"I'm listening." Mirabelle knew that Charlie couldn't be rushed, that whatever he had to tell would come out as long as she didn't ask him any questions.

"I heard it down at the store. I was down there gettin' some cut plug." Charlie had stopped his pacing and was peering intently at the floor.

"Reminds me I have to get in some Mason jars. Got to get those tomatoes put up before they rot on the vine."

"I heard them say it," Charlie told the floor, wagging his head in wonderment. "They said Roger Sprouse was back in town. Drove in yesterday noon, they said. On the stroke of twelve. In a big Cadillac car. Staying at the hotel, they said. Gave a big party last night at the Red Rooster Club. Bought beer for everybody. They was all talking about it down at the store."

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If Charlie had not been regarding the floor so intently, he might have seen a tremor pass through the body of the large woman at the work table. It passed quickly and Mirabelle clamped the lid on the carton of wriggling worms.

"That a fact, Charlie," she said. "Here's your worms."

Charlie probed inside the bulging pockets of his ragged windbreaker and brought out a wadded dollar bill.

"That ain't all, Miss Mirabelle," he continued, for the first time looking directly at her face. "I seen him. I seen him today at the gas station. He was gettin' gas in his car. Boy, that's some car."

Mirabelle's eyes were flat and expressionless in her round face.

"You seen him," she prompted.

"I seen him, and he said—he said I was to tell you—I was to say, 'Roger Sprouse has seen the world and he's back home to stay.' Yes, that's the way he said it, Miss Mirabelle." Charlie nodded his head vigorously.

"Well, thanks for the message, Charlie. Let me know how you do with these worms. I put a few extras in."

Mirabelle handed him the carton and pocketed the crumpled bill. She plodded heavily up the stairs. Charlie tiptoed behind her. Before he could ease himself out the back door, the old man wheeled into the kitchen and fixed him with a penetrating leer.

"You been a mighty long time down cellar with her, Catfish. You just lucky I ain't got my shotgun handy."

Charlie swallowed a mangled protest and leaped out the back door. As he skittered away into the night, the old man's mocking laughter reverberated through the kitchen.

"Did you see him jump, Mirabelle? Haw, haw, haw. Funniest thing I seen since tadpoles."

"He's my best customer, Pa."

"Want to go to bed now." The harsh voice crumpled into a tired whine. "My legs's been painin' me something awful."

Mirabelle turned the wheelchair and pushed it out of the kitchen and through the house to the small room just off the front porch that had been her father's bedroom ever since the accident that had crippled him for life.

There she undressed him and lifted him from the chair to the bed. He was a tall old man, taller than Mirabelle, or would be if he stood up. The years in the wheelchair had left him scrawny and pale.

Lewis MacMaster had been a railroad man, working the freight

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trains up and down the hills and valleys, sometimes as far as Chicago. When Mirabelle was fourteen years old, there'd been a derailment. Her father had been pinned beneath an overturned gondola. After six months in a hospital where no amount of operations or therapy could get him on his feet again, Lewis MacMaster came back to the valley with a disability settlement and a monthly pension check.

There were those in the town who said that Lewis MacMaster's frail pretty wife died because he was too miserly to spend any of his disability money on doctors or medicine for her. There were others who said that she simply wore herself to death taking care of her crippled husband. Whichever it was, Lena MacMaster quietly quit living in the winter of the year following Lewis' accident. Young Mirabelle took over in her place.

The years passed and Mirabelle, tall and strong to begin with, grew even stronger caring for her invalid father. And as Lewis' dependence on Mirabelle settled into a routine, he grew even more miserly and cantankerous. From his secret hoard he doled money out in stingy allotments to cover their daily necessities. He never gave Mirabelle a dime for any fripperies that a young girl might take pleasure in.

When Mirabelle was eighteen she started growing a vegetable garden and set up a roadside stand. With the money she earned from her first sale of squash and cucumbers, she went into town and bought herself a box of face powder, a lipstick, and an eyebrow pencil. When she appeared at dinner that evening, all bright and gay and clown-faced, Lewis MacMaster laughed. His ridicule did more to squelch the timid girl inside the elephantine body than if he had stormed and scowled and forbidden paint and powder. Mirabelle ran off to wash her face, and hid her cosmetics in the back of her dresser drawer. They were still there.

Mirabelle still grew vegetables, but only for their own table. Over the years she'd tried other money-making schemes, always to the accompaniment of her father's scornful laughter. She sold jam and preserves; she baked pies; she made fragrant lavender-scented soap. But although each of these ventures brought her a small income and she had a tidy emergency fund put by in the People's Bank, none of them satisfied the yawning hollow within that other people filled with ambition or children.

Until she started worm farming. She'd gone fishing one day, just to get away from the house for a while, and met Catfish

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Charlie down by the river. Side by side they'd fished off the rotten pier at the foot of MacMaster's hill. Mirabelle was using fat earthworms she'd dug from her garden. Charlie had an assortment of grasshoppers, small skinny worms, and bread balls. For an hour or so neither one of them said a word, but Mirabelle pulled in several bluegill and a fair-sized bass. Charlie pulled in exactly nothing and was looking pretty glum.

At last he whispered, "Mind if I try one of them worms?"

"Help yourself," said Mirabelle.

Charlie looked happier as he began to fill his gunny sack with bluegill and a particularly ugly catfish.

As he baited his hook with Mirabelle's last worm he muttered, "Ol' Roy Goff ain't sellin' night crawlers no more. He give it up."

So Mirabelle took the notion and went to see old Roy Goff. He told her all about worm breeding and how he couldn't keep it up since his arthritis had got so bad, and how since he quit nobody was selling any good bait in the valley. Mirabelle went home with the breeding boxes stacked in the rear of the pickup and a new idea. This was about five years after Roger Sprouse had left the valley.

It was along about this time that Mirabelle saw an apparition. She was twenty-five years old, and although the garden and the chores around the house, and her father, and her newly acquired worm business kept her busy throughout the day, she often had trouble sleeping at night. This particular night she was sitting by her open window watching the shift of clouds against the face of the moon and wondering if things would ever be different for her, although she had no idea of how she wanted them to be different. Her room was dark behind her and the night was bright outside.

She sat, wide-awake but motionless, watching the moon disappear into the belly of a stately black cloud and waiting for it to come out on the other side. She was thinking that she might as well go to bed as soon as the moon reappeared when she saw a flicker of white moving slowly down by the edge of her tomato patch.

She turned quietly in her chair until she could take in the whole of her garden, the tangled underbrush beyond it, and the pine-covered hillside behind the house. She saw a tall column of luminous white swaying past the staked rows of tomato vines, lurching away from the house and toward the path leading on up

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the hill. The cloud passed away from the moon, and by its light she saw that the spectral apparition had bristly gray hair and was wearing bedroom slippers and a nightshirt. It was her father. Walking. Using a discarded stake for a walking stick. Having a hard time of it, but walking.

Mirabelle knew there was only one thing in the world that could get her father on his feet. She stopped long enough to cover her own pale nightgown with a dark coat and tie up her sneakers. Then she followed. She crept past the garden and into the low brambles, choosing her way carefully. Ahead she could hear her father's stumbling footsteps.

She followed swiftly and quietly, hugging the edge of the path, ready to fade into the dark pines at the first sign of his return. But he didn't return. On he went, and on and on. Up the hill and around to its northern side, the side away from the house, the town, and the river. At last Mirabelle came to a clearing bathed in moonlight.

She crouched behind one of the boulders that studded this side of the hill and scanned the space before her. At the far side of the clearing there was a dark jumble that might have been boulders or scrub. At one side of this mass she saw the tall white figure moving back and forth. He seemed to be pulling at something. Suddenly part of the hillside seemed to move with a scraping, crackling noise. She saw her father straighten and glance round the clearing. She felt rather than saw the look of greed and cunning on his face. Then a light appeared in his hand and he disappeared into the face of the hill.

Mirabelle waited. The light in the clearing waxed and waned as more clouds marched across the path of the moon. Mirabelle thought about what she had seen. Her father could walk. She'd given ten years of her life and lost her only chance of getting married, all for nothing. Mirabelle was not surprised. She blamed herself for being a fool.

After perhaps fifteen minutes the gaunt white figure reappeared and again the scraping, crackling sound echoed through the clearing. Her father staggered off down the hill, passing within a few yards of Mirabelle's hiding place.

Mirabelle stayed in the clearing the rest of the night. Sometimes she drowsed propped up against the boulder, sometimes she watched the moon drifting down the sky until at last it set. She pondered what it all meant and what she could do about it.

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When the sun rose, she crossed the clearing. What she had taken in the moonlight for a pile of rocks or a thick growth of scrub turned out to be a cleverly intertwined screen of dead twigs and branches. Looking quite natural, this heap of tangled deadwood moved easily when she tugged at one end. Again the scraping, crackling sound filled the clearing. Behind the screen lay a hole in the hillside, a small cave roofed with rock. It could only be entered on hands and knees.

Mirabelle hunkered down and peered into the hole, but the light only penetrated a short way. She couldn't see the end of it or whatever there was in the cave that drew Lewis MacMaster to it in the middle of the night. But she had a pretty good idea.

She crawled into the cave, moving like a great black bear into its den. The light failed immediately, blocked out by her own bulk. She crawled on for about five or six feet in total darkness, feeling first that the floor of the cave was tilting down and then again that it was climbing up the inside of the hill and she might come out on top. The roof of the cave scraped against her back and its sides pressed in against her shoulders. Soon she could only progress by inching forward on her stomach.

The walls of the cave grew narrower. Mirabelle thought she might get stuck. Wouldn't that be a good laugh on him? He'd have to send out a search party and the whole world would know about his treasure cave. No, he wouldn't let anyone know where his money was, not even to save her life. Maybe the next time he came up here he would find his way blocked by her lifeless body and he'd have to wait until she rotted away before he could get at his hoard. Either way, Mirabelle didn't care. She struggled on, scraping her elbows on the rough floor. At one point she tried to inch backward but found it nearly impossible, so she went on.

At last she came to a place where her groping hands met nothing but space. The floor fell away abruptly and her fingertips couldn't reach bottom. The sides of the cave flared away from her shoulders, and on reaching upward she found that the roof soared off into blackness. She drew her knees up and sat at the edge of the void. Glancing back over her shoulder she saw a tiny glimmer of daylight at the entrance to the cave. It was not enough to light the abyss before her, but it would serve as a beacon for her return.

Cautiously she lowered her feet into the pit. She felt absurd and foolish when her feet immediately encountered solid rock. She

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lowered her heavy body into the pit and, squatting on her heels, she duck-walked her way around the perimeter of the cavern, patting the walls and the floor as she went. Searching. When she found the strongbox on a small ledge against the wall, she sat down in darkness and held it in her lap. This was the thing that had stunted her life, yet she didn't know what to do with it.

She felt no animosity toward the box. She wasn't even interested in finding out what was inside it. In the blackness of the cavern she sat holding the box in her lap and feeling an odd kind of strength flow through her. It wasn't physical. Mirabelle knew all about physical strength. One of the few things she had to be proud of was the strength of her outsized body. This was different.

After a while Mirabelle lay the box back on its ledge and crept back to the narrow tunnel leading to daylight. She burrowed back through the tunnel, the way out seeming much shorter than the way in. She was dressed and in the kitchen frying grits long before her father began yelling for her to come and help him to get out of bed.

Mirabelle continued to live in the big old house on the hill and to care for her father. But after the discovery of the strongbox her nursing was tainted with small meannesses. Her father retaliated with ridicule and scornful laughter. And increased miserliness. And the hoard in the strongbox grew. Each month, when Lewis MacMaster received his pension check in the mail, he would endorse it and send Mirabelle to the bank to cash it. On her return he would count over every nickel, dime, and dollar of it, and spread it out temptingly on his bedside table. By morning it would be gone, and Mirabelle knew that during the night he had made a pilgrimage to his cave. When Mirabelle needed money to do their meager marketing, she would mention it to him in the evening, and in the morning a few bills would appear on the table.

Only once in all those years did Mirabelle return to the clearing in the woods. She didn't enter the cave, but sat on a boulder near its camouflaged entrance. Like a brooding stone guardian she sat for several hours, until at length she rose, shaking her head and muttering to herself, and went home.

On the night that Catfish Charlie told her of the return of Roger Sprouse, Mirabelle felt a resurgence of that peculiar strength she'd felt long ago in the cave holding the money box in

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her lap. As she massaged her father's wasted legs before tucking him in for the night she said, "Got to go to the store tomorrow. Need some Mason jars and some sugar."

The old man grunted. "Get me a wedge of that store cheese. I got a yen for some of that cheese."

Mirabelle adjusted his nightshirt and covered him with the threadbare blanket.

"Good night, Pa," she said, avoiding his greedy black eyes.

She went upstairs to her room, but didn't go to bed. Instead she settled herself in a chair by the window as she used to sit when she was young and when restlessness possessed her nights. Patiently she waited through the hours with no moon to light her vigil. About two in the morning she saw the old man slide past the tomato vines. At the edge of the garden, before plunging into the underbrush, he flicked on his light.

Mirabelle followed. Out of the house and around the garden plot. Into the brush and up the hillside, with the tiny light in her father's hand bobbing before her, drawing her like a magnet. Sometimes she lost sight of it, and the pine woods closed in dank and mysterious. But always it reappeared, beckoning her on, sending her light-footed and silent through the moonless night.

By the time she reached the clearing, the deadwood screen had already been thrust aside and her father had disappeared into the cave. She crept up to the cave mouth and listened. Inside she could hear a faint scrabbling. It continued for a few minutes. Then it stopped. Mirabelle judged that her father had reached the secret inner chamber. Certainly he would spend some time there counting his money, fingering the bills that meant more to him than life and health and his only daughter's happiness. Very well. Let him spend the rest of his life with the thing he loved most.

The boulder that Mirabelle had sat and brooded on all of one summer afternoon lay at one side of the cave mouth, just where the deadwood screen came to rest when it was in place. With all her considerable strength, the strength given to her by the years of lifting the old man into and out of his chair and bed, she pushed the huge rock. The rock resisted. Left behind by a retreating glacier, it would not be moved by mere mortal strength. But Mirabelle's heart was ice, too. Chill hatred knotted her stomach and tensed the muscles of her thighs.

She put her shoulder to the rock, closed her eyes, and with all the might of her years of servitude and humiliation, she pushed.

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The rock groaned and gave way. Slowly at first, then with increased momentum, it tumbled out of its bed and down the slight incline to the cave mouth. There it came to rest, hard, just as Mirabelle had planned it.

She felt all around the edges where the boulder, larger than the mouth of the cave, met the opening. She could feel no chink. Air and light were cut off, and escape. She rested against the boulder, breathing rapidly, picturing the old man within engrossed in the contents of his money box. Beyond that she would not imagine.

Before she left the clearing, she dragged the pile of dead brush across the front of the cave, leaving the scene almost the way it had always looked. She crossed the clearing sedately, at her usual pace, and entered the woods. But before she had gone very far, she felt the urge to run, to leap, to dance in wild fleering circles.

The dark pines gloomed down on her grotesque cavorting, but Mirabelle was beyond fear of the dark forest and the things that inhabited the dark. She had left all that behind in the cave on the hill, along with hate and pain and impotent tears. If anyone had seen her dancing down the hill that night, whirling and leaping, crouching and springing, they would have thought her possessed.

She reached the house, breathless from her exertions. Once the door was closed, cold practicality reasserted itself. Somehow, she would have to produce an explanation for her father's disappearance. To be sure, very few people ever saw her father, but sooner or later someone would inquire. So sooner or later, she would have to have an answer. Better sooner than later, she thought.

She sat down at the kitchen table with a glass of Lewis MacMaster's whiskey, and considered possibilities. But the only possibility that presented itself, where the lack of a body would not be an overwhelming difficulty, was the river.

"The river," Mirabelle breathed and drained off the last of the whiskey.

"The river," she murmured as she stalked through the darkened house to her father's room.

"Down by the riverside," she sang as she trundled her father's wheelchair out onto the front porch. She sat down in the wheelchair and practised a few times, rolling it back and forth along the porch, to gain the touch of steering it. Then she was ready. She sent the chair swooping down the board ramp that she had placed over half of the porch steps to allow her father to roll up and down and give him the freedom of the yard. Then down the

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path to the road, across the dirt road and on down the hill on the other side. The chair moved easily, although the ride was bumpy.

She allowed the chair to increase its speed, pumping away at the wheels with her elbows flapping like giant wings.

"Wheee!" she cried into the black night. And "Wheeeoooeee!" as the chair hurtled down the hillside toward the river. She felt the tall grass come up between her feet and flatten under the passage of the runaway chair. At the foot of the hill the chair slowed and Mirabelle guided it, peering into the darkness, until she found the old pier sticking out into the river. The river was high, almost at flood stage, and she could hear it rushing past, lapping at the pier.

She bumped the chair up onto the pier and rode it slowly out into the hungry river. Before she reached the end of the pier Mirabelle dismounted. Then she pushed the chair, as she had pushed it for so many years with her father in it, to the end of the pier—and right over the edge into the dark water. Then she waded downstream until she reached a rocky outcrop that led back up from the river to the road. She climbed this, went home, and crawled into bed.

In the morning she got up at her usual time and made breakfast as she usually did. When breakfast was ready, she went into her father's room and looked at his empty rumpled bed. Then she went out of the house and walked all around it, poked around the garden, and even went a short way into the woods. All the places where a man in a wheelchair could go without too much difficulty. Her face wore a puzzled frown.

After a while she got into the pickup and drove to town, straight to the Sheriff's office on the second floor of the People's Bank Building.

She came right to the point. "Pa's gone," she said to Sheriff Rickett hulking behind his desk in his two-by-four office lined with Wanted posters.

"Where's he gone to?"

"Don't know. Can you come out and help me look for him?"

Mirabelle explained how she had put him to bed the night before and had gone to bed herself; how she got up in the morning and made breakfast and how he wasn't in his bed when she went to get him; and how she'd looked all over the house and grounds and couldn't find him.

"He's just plain not there," she said. "Wheelchair's gone, too."

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Less than a year away from retirement, Sheriff Rickett believed in comforting the womenfolk and not telling them too much of anything lest they get hysterical. He'd seen a lot of hysterical women in his lifetime, and they made him uneasy.

"Well, Mirabelle," he said. "Suppose you go on back out to the house and I'll get up a search party and be out in about an hour. Chances are he'll be settin' on the front porch by the time you get back there."

"Maybe so," said Mirabelle.

The search party consisted of Theo Curtis who ran a drive-in movie out on the main highway and held a part-time job as guard at the People's Bank. He dreamed of daring bank robberies that he would foil through his quick thinking and bravery, and often served as Sheriff Rickett's unofficial deputy. The B movies that he watched night after night inspired his prosaic days.

The Sheriff and Theo Curtis searched the house from top to bottom, examining closets and cubbyholes and sneezing their way through the attic where the dust of forty years lay undisturbed. In the cellar Theo became excited by the worm boxes and wanted to turn them all out to see if a body was concealed in one of them. He was convinced that someone, Mirabelle or persons unknown, had murdered the old man.

"An old geezer like that just don't up and disappear, Sheriff. I'll bet she done it. Them boxes look mighty suspicious."

"Suppose you just take this rake handle, Theo, and poke around in them boxes. And if you find anything besides worms you let me know. I'm gonna take a look around outside."

Mirabelle sat on the front porch and waited while the Sheriff searched the grounds. He was joined by a disappointed Theo, and they spread farther afield into the woods and down to the dirt road. It was Theo who discovered the wheel ruts and the flattened grass.

"Ho, Sheriff!" he called. "Lookit this." Sheriff Rickett ran ponderously down the slope. Mirabelle came off the porch and followed the track of her wild night ride.

"Goin' on down to the river, looks like," exclaimed Theo, eager to make the most of this major clue. "Somebody dumped him in the river. Sure thing."

"Take it easy, Theo. All we got here is wheel tracks. No sign of anything else. Suppose we see where they go."

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Down on the muddy river bank the wheel tracks were even more pronounced, but where there should have been footprints if someone had been pushing the chair, there was nothing. Out on the pier there were parallel lines of dried mud that petered out before they reached the end of the pier.

Theo volunteered to dive and the Sheriff didn't stop him. Stripped to his undershorts and with the undersea exploits of 007 firmly in mind, Theo Curtis plunged into the swirling brown water. He came up spluttering about four yards downstream from where he went in. The Sheriff watched from the pier and Mirabelle waited patiently on the bank. With difficulty Theo swam back to the pier and hung on gasping to one of its rotting supports.

"That current. It's really something. I'll try one more time."

Theo submerged again, stayed down for a few moments, and came up close to the pier. He swam for the ancient ladder and hauled himself up shivering.

"Chair's down there all right." He shook water out of his ears. "Stuck in the mud or something. No sign of the old man. With that current he would be halfway to Cincinnati by now."

Back at the house, Sheriff Rickett questioned Mirabelle about her father. She answered briefly and seemed wrapped in thought.

How was his health lately?

Not too good.

Did he seem moody?

No more than usual.

How old was he?

Seventy-two come October.

Could he move the wheelchair by himself?

Yes.

Could he get into it by himself?

Sometimes. If he felt like it.

Did he have financial problems?

She didn't know.

"But, Sheriff," she said, "you know how peculiar Pa was about his money. After he lost the use of his legs and Ma died, it was the only thing he had left."

"I know, Mirabelle." He hoped she wasn't going to turn hysterical on him. "I only have to ask for the record. I'm going to write it down as an accident. Temporarily. You understand, it may have been suicide, but we don't know. It won't do him or you any good

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for that to get around. Well," he hitched up his belt and put on his hat. "Guess we'll be getting along. You understand, if the body comes ashore, you'll have to come down and identify it." His voice trailed off. "Goodbye now. You need anything, just come and see me."

In the car going back to town, Theo Curtis bubbled with excitement and theories.

"She could of done it, Sheriff. She's strong enough. Did you see those arms of hers? She could of snapped his neck like a toothpick and dumped him in the river. What do you think?"

"Not unless she could fly, Theo. No. If Mirabelle MacMaster was ever gonna kill that mean old buzzard, she'd of done it twenty years ago. And I wouldn't of blamed her one bit."

After the Sheriff and Theo left, Mirabelle went up to her room. She put on a clean smock and brushed out her hair. It hung below her waist in kinky billows from having been braided so long. She tied it back with a red ribbon the way she used to do twenty years ago.

She rummaged in the back of her dresser drawer and brought out the face powder and lipstick, hidden away but not forgotten. She patted a light sprinkling of powder on her face, just enough to tone down her freckles and soften the creases around her eyes. The lipstick was dry and hard and would only leave the faintest of pink smudges on her lips. It was enough. She decided that her thick black brows didn't need any penciling.

Then she went downstairs to start supper. She stoked up the old black stove. She stuffed a chicken and put it in to roast. She made a pie with blueberries from her garden.

While the pie was baking, she sat on the front porch and waited.

About four o'clock she saw a dust cloud down the road coming from the direction of town. She sat stiffly on the top porch step until she saw that it was only Willie Bateman in his jeep delivering the evening paper. She got up and went inside to take the pie out of the oven.

She set the pie to cool and was basting the chicken when she heard the car door slam. Toe-tapping footsteps sounded on the porch and a loud rat-tat on the door.

"Mirabelle, honey! Are ya home? Hey, Mirabelle! It's me. I came to take you for a ride."

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Mirabelle closed the oven and put down her basting spoon. She heard the door creak open and the sharp heal-and-toeing come into the house.

"Where you hidin' at, Mirabelle? Ne'mind. I'll find you. You can't get away from me that easy this time."

Roger Sprouse stood in the kitchen doorway looking dandy in a plaid jacket and dark blue pants. He held a Stetson hat in one hand and a box of chocolates in the other. His shoes were shiny and had thick soles and even thicker heels. Even so he was still a head shorter than Mirabelle; he was still skinny and bowlegged. But he was there.

Mirabelle grinned, for the first time in twenty years.

"I fixed chicken and blueberry pie," she said.

"M-m-m. I thought something in here smelled pretty good. We got time for a little spin first? I want to show you off to my new car."

"Whyever not," said Mirabelle.

Mirabelle was dazzled by the long lemon-yellow convertible that crouched next to her rusty old pickup in the yard. She couldn't know whether it was this year's model or ten years old. It was powerful and bright. And obviously expensive. And obviously Roger had done well.

Roger drove fast, up and down hills, along the river road, over to the highway and back again. Mirabelle untied her hair ribbon and let her hair blow wild and free.

On the way back Roger slowed down and began to talk seriously. "I was sure sorry to hear about your pa, Mirabelle. But to tell the honest truth, if it hadn't of happened I wouldn't of come out to see you. I was gonna wait till you came into town to say my piece."

Mirabelle nodded and smiled.

"I was gonna catch you at the store or at the bank or at the post office. And I was gonna take you over to the hotel and give you a restaurant meal and tell you all about my travels, about the jobs I done and the places I seen and the women I almost got hooked up with, but didn't. And then I was gonna tell you how wherever I went I never stopped thinkin' about you, and wonderin' what it would of been like if you'd come away with me that time. And then I was gonna ask you to come away with me this time, and we'd go off to Mexico or California or wherever we liked."

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"Well, now we don't have to go away," said Mirabelle shyly.

"Ain't it the truth."

Roger moved into Mirabelle's house, but occupied the old man's bedroom downstairs until they were married two months later. Mirabelle insisted on observing the proprieties to that extent, but felt it was extravagant for Roger to pay for a hotel room when there were rooms to spare in the old house on the hill. Besides, he was eating all his meals at the house, and over those meals he spoke enthusiastically of the improvements they would make in the place and what a valuable piece of property it was.

"First of all, we'll get that kitchen fixed up. Think what you could do, Mirabelle, with an electric range and a big freezer and a dishwashing machine. And then we'll get the whole place painted, inside and out. Why, I don't think it's seen a touch of a paintbrush since the day it was built."

Mirabelle was enchanted and agreed to everything. He brought her expensive presents—perfume and earrings and fancy nightgowns which she wore to please him but felt silly wearing. He forbade her to continue in the worm business.

"Roger Sprouse's lady don't have to mess around with no worms," he said. "And that's what you are, Mirabelle. A lady."

Mirabelle was astonished and amused by marriage. If that's what it's all about, she thought, I wonder why I felt so mumpish all those years. But she liked having Roger around the house, even though his great plans didn't seem to materialize and he did nothing about finding a job. He spent a lot of time at the Red Rooster Club where Mirabelle felt conspicuous and out of place.

Whenever she asked him about his plans he would say, "I got something cooking, Mirabelle. I got a terrific deal cooking. In the meantime we're doing okay. Right? Ain't we having fun?"

And Mirabelle agreed. For the first time in her life she was having fun.

About six months after Roger moved in, Mirabelle happened to be on the front porch when Willie Bateman's jeep drove up and Roger swung down from the passenger side with the evening paper under his arm. It was a cold lowering day with a north wind whipping around the hill and chopping the river into sharp little wavelets. Roger wore only his bright plaid jacket against the chill. He shivered into the house and Mirabelle followed, wondering.

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"Where's the car?" she asked.

"Traded it in on a new model," Roger answered. "I'll pick it up in a day or so."

The new model never appeared, and Roger took to driving the old pickup into town.

A few days later Mirabelle asked Roger for some housekeeping money. He'd given her money from time to time, but mostly she'd been using her emergency bank account to buy groceries and keep Roger in beer. She hated asking him for money; it was too much like the way she'd had to ask her father. But her bank account was almost wiped out. It never occurred to her to go to the cave in the hillside.

Roger cleared his throat, rattled his newspaper, and asked, "Whatever happened to the old man's money? Did he use it all up?"

"No," said Mirabelle, feeling suddenly homely and stupid.

"Well, don't you have it now?"

"No."

"Why not? You're his only relative, ain't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, then. You inherit. It's that simple."

"I guess so." Mirabelle felt that her voice would dry up if she had to answer any more questions about the money. But Roger pressed on.

"You didn't let any lawyers get their hooks into it, did you? You couldn't be that dumb."

Mirabelle looked at him with flat dumb eyes.

In the days that followed, Roger prowled the house. She could hear him in the attic, ripping up floorboards. He tore the backs out of closets looking for secret hiding places. He progressed through the bedrooms on the second floor. He completely destroyed the little room off the front porch where her father had lain for so many wasted nights. She sat in the kitchen while the destruction raged and said nothing.

At last he came to her, mean and hungry, and held her by her long hair.

"You know where it is, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Why won't you tell me?"

"Didn't know you wanted it so bad."

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"Well, you're gonna tell me now, ain't you?" He twisted the long hank of hair until her neck was bent across the back of the chair she sat in.

"Can't." Her dark eyes stared up at him out of their hollow craters.

"Dammit, woman! Don't be such a fool. Why do you think I married you? It sure wasn't your pretty face."

"Can't tell you. But I can show you," Mirabelle whispered.

"When?" he demanded.

"Tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll take you there."

The next morning Mirabelle got up early and braided her hair. She put on an old smock and tied up her sneakers.

"Better bring a flashlight," she said as she buttoned up her old black coat. "You'll need it."

She led Roger past the shriveled tomato vines, through the bare frozen underbrush, and up the hill into the dark winter pines. She crossed the clearing and wrenched the pile of branches away from the front of the cave.

"You'll have to help me with that rock. I can't do it by myself."

"Why, Mirabelle, honey." Roger was all smiles now. "Is that why you never touched the old man's money? 'Cause you couldn't move that little-bitty rock by yourself? Who put it there, anyway? Did you and the old man think this up between you? And you couldn't trust your own ever-lovin' husband to help you out?"

"I'm trusting you now, ain't I? If you want the money, you'll have to push the rock."

Roger laid his shoulder to the rock and Mirabelle did the same, wondering what she would do if a skeletal hand emerged pointing an accusing finger at her. She hoped the old man had chosen to die in the inner chamber, comforting himself with his strongbox to the very end. The rock teetered and crunched against the side of the hill, and slowly, slowly ground away from the mouth of the cave.

A dank underground smell arose from the opening in the hillside. Roger didn't seem to notice it. There was nothing in the entrance as far back as Mirabelle could see. Aside from a few scratches on the rock face such as might have been made with the butt end of a useless flashlight hammering in the dark.

"In there?" Roger asked, looking a little unhappy.

Mirabelle nodded. "All the way back. There's a tunnel and a

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sort of room at the end. That's where the strongbox is."

Roger hesitated. "How much is there?"

Mirabelle shrugged. "Don't know. He never told me."

"In town they said he must have put away thousands. They said he never touched the disability money and saved most of his pension."

"Could be true. All I know is we lived on beans and sidemeat most of the time. And what I grew in the garden. You figure it out."

Roger's spirits rose and he flashed her his happy grin. "Mirabelle, honey, I'm sorry for all those things I said. I'll go in and get that money and then we'll have us a riproaring good time. We'll go to Mexico and live like kings. Okay?"

"Suits me."

Roger switched on his flashlight and plunged into the tunnel. Mirabelle waited long enough for the soles of his shoes to disappear into the darkness of the cave. Then she started pushing on the rock. This time it was harder for her. This time she had only disappointment and chagrin to help her move mountains. But she had not as far to go.

The rock slid slowly and inexorably into position. It sealed the cave as if it had never been moved, and Mirabelle pressed her heaving body against it, whispering, "You were right, Pa. You were right. If only you hadn't of been so mean about it."

Mirabelle went home and spent the rest of the day cleaning and repairing her worm boxes. She filled them with fresh black earth and peat moss and mixed up a new batch of feed. She would dig the worms at night in the garden. Spring would soon be here and by May or June she would need all the money she could earn. Let them talk about her in the town. Let them say, "Poor dumb Mirabelle Sprouse couldn't hold her man." Let them say, "That Roger Sprouse, wasn't he something? Blew into town and blew right out again. Went off to Mexico or somewhere and never knew he was a daddy-to-be. Or maybe he did. Maybe that's why he skedaddled. Haw, haw, haw."

Mirabelle didn't care. She would have her worms and she would have her child. She would grow a garden and sell tomatoes and squash and cucumbers. And on summer nights she would sit in the clearing on the hillside and watch the clouds drift across the face of the moon.

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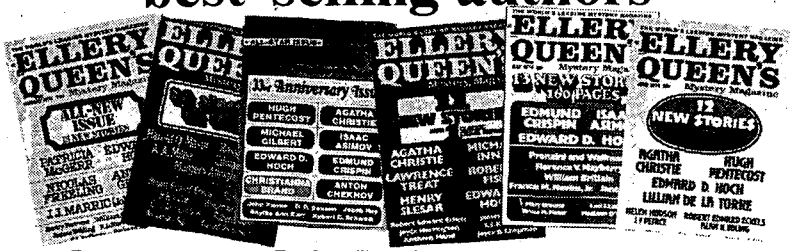

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

Last month, due to certain misunderstandings, I failed to sum up the year 1974. Hence the summing up of '74 must be done in this issue for January, '75.

Once more it was a so-so year. Under ideal circumstances I should prefer books almost equally divided between detection and mystery-thriller or mystery-adventure-espionage, with detection somewhat heavier in the balance. But that's a dream.

Although July gave us three admirable detective novels supported by one mystery-thriller, two other months, January and May, provided no worthy fiction of any kind. In January I avoided the *impasse* by discussing the best work of the late Willard Huntington Wright, alias S. S. Van Dine. In May a biography of America's ablest short-story writer among mystery mongers enabled me to commend *his* best work in some detail.

Biography, either factual or imaginative as fiction, rescued your mentor on still another occasion, supplying our entire list of titles for April. These biographies, real or fanciful, will be considered in due course. Meanwhile, allowing my own preference for fair-play detection of an ingenious plot, with that let retrospect begin.

The Thirteenth Trick, by Russell Braddon, keeps its reader on horns of doubt between only two suspects in mass murder. Swedish harness racing animates the many problems of Olle Hogstrand's *The Gambler.* We must contrast it with other racing complexities in *Slayride,* by Dick Francis, to watch an English investigator solve the murder mystery at a Norwegian track.

Speaking of contrasts, detection also flings baffling enigmas at two Bow Street Runners: one (Jeremy Sturrock) in 1800 with R. G. Jeffreys's *A Wicked Way To Die;* the other (Edmund Blackstone) in 1824 with *Beau Blackstone,* by Richard Falkirk.

Two modern masters have supplied new books, George Harmon Coxe at his best in *The Inside Man,* and Michael Innes similarly strong with *Appleby's Other Story.* As for similar past performances, I commended the Readers' Digest two-volume anthology,

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Great Stories of Mystery and Suspense, including a little gem by Ellery Queen, as well as *Murder on Board,* triple travel-homicide from Dame Agatha Christie. Before leaving detection, let's not forget Elizabeth Peters's *The Murders of Richard III,* in which this talented tyro counterfeits fifteenth century conditions and characters for her sound modern dilemma or dead-end.

Recommended mystery-thrillers? Well, yes.

Throughout *The Highbinders,* by Oliver Bleeck, the fabled sword of France's Crusader-Saint, King Louis IX, leads Philip St. Ives a dance of death through half-world London until the discovery of a hiding-place so clever as almost to defy detection. In *Swap,* by Walter Wagner, Captain David Garrison rescues a child hostage from the Russians after Yankee-Soviet clashes without espionage. In *Zaleski's Percentage,* by Donald MacKenzie, a Polish gentleman preserves his honor by restealing the jewelled relic he first stole in war-time long ago.

In *Pandora's Box,* by Thomas Chastain, robbery at the Metropolitan Museum soars to its startling climax; great art explodes a bomb of disaster with John Murphy's *The El Greco Puzzle;* Hal Gulliver's *Kill with Style* features uproar round a projected hotel for the island of Martinique; whereas my own favorite, *The Savage Day,* by Jack Higgins, gives us murderous double-cross in northern Ireland.

Though there were other mystery-thrillers, and good ones, let's open the door to espionage.

Space permits only brief praise for Lionel Black's *The Life and Death of Peter Wade,* Owen Sela's *The Kiriov Tapes,* Peter Driscoll's *In Connection with Kilshaw,* with special praise for Sam Durell in *Assignment—Amazon Queen,* by Edward S. Aarons, and for Matt Helm in Donald Hamilton's *The Intimidators.*

Fictional biography, as well as imaginary events to set off a real character? One has inspired *Jones Bond, the Authorized Biography of 007,* and the other some picturesque exploits for Edgar Allan Poe in Barry Perowne's *A Singular Conspiracy.*

Authentic biography? Among these let's concentrate on Charles A. Norton's *Melville Davisson Post: Man of Many Mysteries,* our most brilliant writer of the detective short story.

Perhaps I should add that the book I found most welcome was *Best "Thinking Machine" Detective Stories,* by Jacques Futrelle, also a volume of shorts from the French-named American who lost his life in the *Titanic* disaster of 1912.

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DISCOVERY

another "unknown" Tictocq story by

O. HENRY

You will recall that in the May 1971 issue of EQMM we offered you a "lost" Tictocq story by the Old Master, O. Henry. That one was subtitled "The Murder in Rue St. Bonjour." It was originally published in the June 23, 1894 issue of O. Henry's own humorous weekly, "The Rolling Stone," and was not reprinted, in any book or magazine, for 77 years.

Now we give you another "lost Tictocq," this one from the July 14, 1894 issue of "The Rolling Stone," and this one likewise out of print for more than three-quarters of a century. Prepare for another preposterous parody—but then what should a parody be? (By the way, O. Henry originally signed this story as by Major Ingraham Toots.)

TICTOCQ, the Great French Detective; or, A Soubrette's Diamonds

by O. HENRY

I am a physician. My name is Paul Montarde. I have no place in this story except that of chronicler of the things performed by the most wonderful man in the world — Tictocq, the great French detective. There is nothing Tictocq cannot find out. The world has never seen his equal.

I have rooms in the Rue Saltpetre. There Tictocq comes every evening, for he is a lonely, silent man, and I think I am his only friend. When he comes I open a bottle of Chianti wine and bring out the Turkish tobacco given me by Hassan Pacha, the Rajah of the Nile. Tictocq is a slender man of middle height with a smooth, pale face, and eyes that see everything. He talks but little, but when the wine mellows his

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soul he tells me the strangest things in the world. He has taken a great fancy to me and often allows me to accompany him when he has a difficult case to unravel.

Tictocq is no ordinary detective. He does not seek employment. He is what he calls a consulting detective, and the regular force go to him when their efforts have failed. His powers of penetration and of deduction are marvelous.

He entered my room one evening, and said, "Bon soir, mon ami. I rejoice to find you alone, but you have not long been so. A man from Austin, Texas, has been here. He handed you a letter. He had been eating onions. He was angry and struck the table with his fist. You gave him a check for forty francs. Moreover, you are no Frenchman, but a Russian, Nihilist, and a member of one of their most secret and daring bands."

Every word he spoke was true, but I thought the secret mine alone. "How dare you, monsieur," I exclaimed, springing to my feet.

Tictocq threw himself into an armchair and laughed longer than I had ever seen him before.

"Parbleu, friend Montarde," he said with difficulty between his gusts of merriment, "listen and I will tell you how I knew. Please remember that nothing escapes my observation. It is my profession to observe. When I entered the room I saw that something had ruffled your usually placid demeanor. Then I began to cast about for the cause. Now, follow my train of reasoning. Someone evidently had visited you. I saw a large spot on the carpet where someone had expectorated tobacco juice; the deduction is clear—a man from Austin, Texas. He handed you a letter. See where you moved your chair back a foot or two and disarranged the rug. The odor of onions is peculiarly disagreeable to you—you moved to avoid his breath. The ink spattered around the inkstand when he struck the table. I see on the table a receipted bill for eight dollars for a hunting jacket. You never hunt. The bill is an old one or the man would not have been so angry. Let me see: you have never mentioned being in Texas and yet you pay a bill to a man from there. Why is this? In the year 188- the Grand Duke Alexis took a hunting trip through that country. You were with him. Any man so honored would have still enjoyed his favor unless—you turned Nihilist and he helped you to escape to France. How far am I wrong, garcon?"

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"You are the devil," I said.

"Only a man who uses his eyes," said Tictocq. "And now for a bottle of Chianti."

One day Tictocq called for me.

"Come with me, Paul," he said. "I am sent for by the great American actress Minnie Collards to come to the Hotel Americaine. Someone has stolen her diamonds. I would not go at the bidding of any one in France, but an American—we must show international courtesy."

I went with him to the hotel.

Mademoiselle Minnie Collards was the most ravishingly beautiful and charming woman I had ever seen. She was famous in soubrette parts, and was acknowledged to be at the head of her profession. She was a little creature, with a figure like Psyche's, an arch laughing face, and a head "running over with curls."

She received us in her boudoir in an enchanting filmy white dress, short enough to show two of the neatest ankles in the world.

"Oh, Mr. Policeman," she said, half laughing, half crying, "do please get me my diamonds. They are worth fifty thousand dollars. See, here is the case. They were in my trunk, and the bell was broken, and I only stepped down for a moment to call the clerk, and now they are gone."

She wrung her little ringed hands, and a tear or two as bright as any diamond rolled down her soft round cheek.

It is my opinion that Tictocq fell in love with her on the spot. I never saw the man wake up so. He is really a handsome fellow and only lacked a little animation to make him charming. He took her hand in his as he would have done in soothing a child.

"Be calm, Mademoiselle," he said, looking at her long and smiling a little. "You shall have your diamonds back. Tictocq has said it."

Mademoiselle Collards danced about the room like a feather.

"Oh, I know I will, Mr. Policeman," she said brightly. "Now, please get them right away, for I want to wear them on the stage next week. You will advertise in the papers for them, will you not?"

Tictocq smiled indulgently.

"Now, Mademoiselle," he said, "you must allow me to examine this apartment. I will not ask you many questions, and I will not be long about it. With your permission—"

This wonderful man went to work.

He examined the entire room—the carpets, doors, win-

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dow sills, wall, and the trunk from which the diamonds had been stolen. Then he stood still, folded his arms, and took in everything with his wonderful eyes, studying the arrangement of the room and gnawing his lip a little. Mademoiselle Collards sat in a chair gazing at him admiringly and swinging her pretty feet.

Her mother, a wrinkled old woman in black, came in and began knitting.

Presently Tictocq turned sharply and squarely to Mademoiselle, and said shortly, "Where is Tom Robinson?"

Mademoiselle gave a little scream, and Madame stopped knitting.

"I saw him in the hotel this morning," said Madame.

"Please attend to my words," said Tictocq, "and observe if I am correct. He is five feet nine inches high, wears a checked suit and tan shoes. He drinks a little too much and is deeply in love with Mademoiselle, for which, I can not blame him"—with a polite bow at the beautiful little creature . . .

Madame clicked her needles sharply, Mademoiselle showed her white teeth and kicked her heels together.

"The man I have described has the diamonds," said Tictocq. "I am going to get them. I will bring them to Mademoiselle tomorrow afternoon at three o'clock. Au revoir."

Tictocq and I left the hotel.

"Nom de Dieu," said I, "how in the world did you do it?"

"I will tell briefly what I have discovered thus far. The papers yesterday morning spoke of an intrusive admirer of Mademoiselle Collards who was ejected from her theater the night before. The paper said he was an American who had followed her to this country. I found on the register the name of Tom Robinson, Boston, Mass. This was the home also of Mademoiselle. The man himself I have not yet seen, but two of the best police spies in Paris are keeping him in sight."

"How could you describe him," said I, "if you have never seen him?"

Tictocq smiled his most pleased smile.

"Who could deny what I said, mon ami?" he replied.

At 2:30 on the following day I went with Tictocq to the Hotel Americaine.

We went straight to Mademoiselle's apartment.

"The man who got the diamonds will be here at three," said Tictocq. "I have written a letter to him that will bring him."

We found Mademoiselle Col-

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lards as lovely and lively as ever. Tictocq told her of his plan.

"How nice," she said, clapping her hands and dancing, and then I thought I heard her say to herself: "Won't it be a joke on old Tom and the biggest all out."

At 3:00 promptly the firm tread of Mr. Robinson was heard in the hallway.

Tictocq and I were concealed behind some curtain.

The door opened and he entered.

He was big, blond, and handsome and wore dark clothes. He was not at all like Tictocq's description of him.

"Where is Minnie?" he asked. "You sent for me?"

Tictocq sprang from his retreat and seized the man.

"I am Tictocq the Detective," he said firmly. "Now give me those diamonds."

I saw Mademoiselle stuff her handkerchief in her mouth to conceal some emotion—I knew not whether laughter or tears.

"What are you doing in my rooms?" said Mr. Robinson.

I do not know exactly how it happened, but the big man seemed to reach for his hip pocket and then Tictocq fired from the pocket of his sack coat and Robinson staggered and fell heavily with a bullet hole in his side.

I heard a loud, long, agonized scream, and Mademoiselle Collards threw herself upon his form.

"My God," she cried. "You have shot my husband. I never had any diamonds!"

Tictocq and I crept softly and quickly away.

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a *NEW* Raffles story by

BARRY PEROWNE

Here is one of the best of Barry Perowne's reincarnations of E. W. Hornung's famous character, A. J. Raffles, the Amateur Cricketer-and-Cracksman of the fin de siècle*; and of course wherever Raffles is, his "Watson," Bunny Manders, is not far behind . . . a most interesting* mélange *of turn-of-the-century international politics (specifically, the Samoan Crisis), Robert Louis Stevenson and his Club portrait, letters of protest to* The Times *in that bygone Age of Imperialism, a sinister Tattooed Man, and—you can count on it when Raffles is around—a "collaring of the swag" . . .*

RAFFLES AND THE MONEY-BELT

by BARRY PEROWNE

"Ah-hah! A. J. Raffles and Bunny Manders! Charming, is she not, my dear fellows!"

At the intrusive voice, Raffles and I turned reluctantly from our contemplation of the girl who, exquisite in her state of nature, wandered through a field of wheat, twining poppies idly in her hair.

Tophatted like ourselves, gentlemen with catalogues sauntered by in converse with ladies holding lorgnettes, for it was Preview Day at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition, Burlington House, Piccadilly.

Twinkling his eyes at us over half-lensed glasses was the Secretary of a club to which we belonged. With him was a tall, bronzed, handsome man with a grey moustache, whom the Secretary introduced to us as Mr. William Haggard.

"A fellow Club member of ours," said the Secretary. "You may have read a book which his brother published quite recently, H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*."

"Who hasn't?" said Raffles, with a smile.

"Mr. Haggard's on furlough from Samoa," said the Secre-

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tary, "where he's the British representative on the Land Commission. I'm glad we've run into you here, as there's a matter I'd like to take up with you. Have you chaps chanced to notice the letters which another fellow Club member of ours, Robert Louis Stevenson, is currently publishing in *The Times* and also in an American periodical called, I understand, *McClure's*?"

We had to admit that, though we both were well acquainted with the works of Mr. Stevenson, we did not know him personally, and the letters in question had escaped our attention.

"A pity," said the Secretary. "For some years now, R.L.S. has made his home in Samoa —for health reasons, don't you know. And by Jove, my dear fellows, these letters he's sending from his house there, Vailima, make a vehement attack on the United States, Germany, and Great Britain, the three Powers signatory to the recent Berlin Convention, which purports to have settled the Samoan Problem, eh, Haggard?"

"A problem, principally," Mr. Haggard told us, "of the rival claims of two Chiefs to the Paramount Chieftancy. The people of Samoa, like the people of Stevenson's own country, Scotland, are a warrior people, a people of Clans. Their history, like that of Scotland, is a history of Clan warfare."

"Massacre of Glencoe sort of thing," said the Secretary.

Mr. Haggard nodded. "Yes, blood has often run red in the palm forests. And husbandry's been neglected because of Clan warfare—with the result that foreigners have come in and, as happened in Scotland, bought up for a song much of the land that had belonged for centuries to Samoan village families. The foreigners are mostly British, American, and German planters. So the three Powers offered to adjudicate between the claims of the two rival Chiefs. Hence the Berlin Convention."

"Where the diplomats," said the Secretary, "upheld the claim of the Chief they can most easily influence. Right, Haggard?"

"I'm afraid so," Mr. Haggard said. "The Convention set up an Island Council, composed of the British and American Consuls and the German Consul, Baron Senfft Von Pilsach, under the Chairmanship of a neutral Swedish gentleman, a Mr. Cedarcrantz, to 'advise' and 'guide' the chosen Chief."

"And what happened to the other Chief?" Raffles asked.

"Chief Mataafa," said Mr. Haggard, "a wise and able man. He's not even been given a voice on the Island Council."

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"Fishy, is it not?" said the Secretary. "It could lead to a fresh outbreak of Clan warfare—"

"And if that happens," said Raffles, "it'll give the three Powers an excuse to intervene, on the grounds of protecting their planters, and collar the swag—I mean, annex Samoa—for division among themselves?"

"Precisely what R.L.S. suspects," exclaimed the Secretary, "and what his letters from Vailima are trying to persuade public opinion in England, Germany, and the United States to prevent!"

"In fairness," said Mr. Haggard, "one must admit that the Convention set up a Land Commission with three members—one American, one German, one British—to study ways and means of restoring some of the plantation properties to the Samoans themselves."

"Window-dressing!" said the Secretary. "You said yourself, Haggard, that your recommendations are being consistently pigeon-holed. And certainly R.L.S.'s letters of protest are stirring up a hornet's nest in Whitehall, to say nothing of Washington and the Wilhelmstrasse. Which brings me, my dear Raffles and Manders, to the matter I'd like to broach to you—"

"I'm afraid," Raffles said, "Bunny Manders and I don't go in much for politics, do we, Bunny?"

"Absolutely not, Raffles!"

"This has nothing to do with politics," said the Secretary. "It's purely a Club matter. There's a general feeling among our members that the Club should have a portrait of R.L.S. So we propose to commission the artist whose fresh young talent is so evident in his *Poppy Girl* here to go out to Samoa and paint a portrait of our absent member in the exotic surroundings of his home, Vailima."

"Excellent idea," said Raffles, and I concurred with enthusiasm.

"Splendid!" said the Secretary. "I'm empowered to take up a subscription for the purpose. May I put you down, then, for—shall we say, my dear fellows—fifty guineas apiece?"

My heart sank. Fifty guineas! Both our accounts were overdrawn. But Raffles produced his chequebook with a casual air and, painful though it was to me, I felt obliged to follow his example.

"Fresh English faces," Mr. Haggard remarked, as we shook hands with him on parting, "are always a welcome sight to English exiles in

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Samoa. If ever you should find yourselves at loose ends in the Pacific, you must look me up and be my guests for a while."

"The Pacific, I'm afraid," said Raffles regretfully, "is beyond our horizon."

"Absolutely," I said.

Yet, such are the chances of life, the rising sun on a beautiful morning many months later found us standing at a liner's boat-deck rail, with Raffles studying through binoculars three faint smudges of smoke which, widely separated, blemished the illimitable blue of the Pacific sea and sky.

"Warships," he said. "Take a look, Bunny."

He handed me the binoculars, which belonged to the liner's Purser, who was standing at the rail with us and had drawn our attention to the smoke. Focussing the binoculars on them, I saw that they were indeed made by warships, which were steaming along slowly with guns jutting from their turrets, sailors moving around on their decks, flags fluttering from the jackstaffs.

"The Stars and Stripes," I said, "the Imperial German Eagle, the British White Ensign."

"Light cruisers," said the Purser, "patrolling, hull down, off Samoa."

"The long arms," Raffles said thoughtfully, "of the Three Big W's—Whitehall, Washington, and the Wilhelmstrasse."

His dark hair crisp, he was wearing white flannels and a blazer. His keen face was deeply tanned by the fierce sunshine of antipodean cricket grounds, for, not long after our meeting with Mr. Haggard, Raffles had been selected for an All-England team to tour Australia. Thanks to some cajolery of our bank manager, we had scraped together enough money for me to accompany the team and provide moral support.

We had both been re-reading the works of R.L.S. and, out of sheer curiosity about the proposed portrait in which we had a hundred-guinea vested interest, we had decided, at the conclusion of the cricket tour, to return to England *via* San Francisco, stopping off on the way at Samoa to visit Mr. Haggard.

"D'you happen to know, Purser," Raffles said, offering us Sullivans from his cigarette-case, "if Mr. R. L. Stevenson is still living in Samoa?"

I felt a thrill of excitement as Raffles asked the question, for we had been long out of touch with newspapers, and anything might have happened to a lone man, in a remote corner of the world, who was making his continued existence inconven-

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ient to the Three Big W's.

"We'll be raising Upolu Head any minute now," said the Purser, "and I can point out Mr. Stevenson's house to you, but I don't know whether he's still living there."

He took back his binoculars from me and focussed them on a distant sailing-vessel.

"Schooner," he said, "the notorious Tattooed Man's. No mistaking that blackguard."

"Blackguard?" I asked.

"He's well known all over the Pacific, Mr. Manders," said the Purser, handing Raffles the binoculars. "Calls himself an island trader, but if there's any dirty work going on—opium-smuggling, spying, pearl-poaching—he's usually mixed up in it somewhere. God knows what his nationality is, but he keeps himself well in with the island folk and picks up a lot of inside information."

"He's a work of art, Bunny," Raffles said, giving me a turn with the binoculars.

I focussed them on the schooner. Heeled over a little, with a bone in her teeth, the schooner had a litter of green stuff on deck. A giant of a man stood at the wheel. He wore only tattered duck trousers and a brass-studded leather belt equipped with pockets. He was indeed a work of art, for intricate tattoo designs writhed all over his muscular torso, shark-mouthed visage, and hairless head.

"He's on his way out to those cruisers," said the Purser. "He'll peddle that green stuff to their crews—yams, breadfruit, fresh cocoanuts. And you can bet your life that he's got the latest scuttlebutt on the shore situation for their captains that'll stuff some of their dollars, deutschmarks, and pounds sterling into that money-belt of his."

"Money-belt?" said Raffles.

I glanced at him furtively. Our funds were low, and travelling came expensive. But Raffles's grey eyes were unfathomable.

The schooner bore away to starboard, and I forgot the Tattooed Man as the Purser pointed out to us a headland, grown over with palm forest, rising steeply out of the sea.

"Upolu Head," said the Purser. "You can just see Vailima, up there."

I glimpsed the gable end of a house high up among the dense foliage—the house, solitary and enigmatic under the heat-shimmer, of the lone man who had dared to challenge with his pen the guns of the Three Big W's.

Was he still there?

I swallowed with a dry throat as the sudden booming of the

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liner's siren awoke deep echoes in the island hills.

"The portrait of R.L.S.?" said William Haggard as, in the light of a pendent hurricane lantern, we sat at dinner that night on the screened verandah of his secluded bungalow on the outskirts of the little Samoan capital, Apia. "Yes, I was about to mention that matter."

"The portrait exists?" Raffles asked.

"Certainly," said our host. "The young artist arrived, spent a couple of weeks up at Vailima, and did a fine job. He's gone on now to Tahiti. He's left the portrait up at Vailima. I told him you chaps were coming, and would deliver it to the Club for him. I thought you wouldn't mind?"

"Good heavens, no," said Raffles. "We'll be delighted."

"We'll ride up to Vailima next week, then, and collect it. R.L.S. is alone up there just now, except for his old mother. His American wife, Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson, and her son and daughter, Lloyd and Belle—R.L.S.'s stepchildren—have gone to Sydney for some dental treatment that's a bit beyond our local resources."

Raffles mentioned the lurking cruisers we had seen, and our host nodded.

"Stevenson's friend, Chief Mataafa, who was passed over by the Berlin Convention, is restive. Four hot-headed young sub-chiefs of his made a warlike demonstration on his behalf the other day. The Island Council advised the Paramount Chief to have them jailed. Mr. Cedarcrantz, the neutral Swedish gentleman who is Chairman of the Council, wisely protested at this, but nobody listens to him."

"The usual fate of neutral Chairmen," said Raffles, "however wise."

"The result, of course," said Mr. Haggard, "is that Chief Mataafa is having difficulty in restraining his other hotheads. I'm afraid trouble's brewing. Hence those cruisers." He rose. "We've only one mail a month here. If you'll excuse me, I've some paper work to finish. It'll merely be pigeon-holed in Whitehall, of course. All the same, it must go off on the liner when it leaves to-morrow. Make yourselves at home."

But it was such a lovely night, fragrant and tranquil, that Raffles and I were tempted to take a stroll around.

"Washington, Whitehall, and the Wilhelmstrasse," I remarked, as we sauntered with our cigarettes under the palm fronds, "seem as remote as—"

"Shh," said Raffles. "Listen!"

We paused, listening, and I

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became aware of a faint crooning sound. To find out where it was coming from, we walked on along a footpath that meandered, faintly starlit, through the palm trees, and the crooning became identifiable as that of male voices intoning, in slow harmony, a song of profound melancholy.

Abruptly, the trees ended. Across a narrow, starlit space, the wall of a building loomed up before us. The building stood on squat brick pillars, like Haggard's bungalow, but was bigger, with glassless, unlighted windows, very small, about twelve feet above ground.

"Barred windows, Bunny," Raffles murmured. "Cells. This must be the side of the jailhouse—with those four prisoners in it that Haggard mentioned."

Under the fringing trees, we stood listening to the slow, deep-toned lament of the imprisoned Samoan village chiefs in the darkness of their cells.

"White shadows in the South Seas," Raffles muttered, and suddenly gripped my arm. "Look there!" he breathed.

Soundless, a man was stealing along in the narrow space between the trees and the jailhouse wall. Barefoot, huge in the star-glimmer, with his torso, face, and scalp writhed over by tattooing, he held in one hand something that looked to me like a fishing-reel of the kind used for shark or marlin.

He passed quite close to us and vanished around to what evidently was the back of the jailhouse. Hugging the tree-shadow, we followed, to see what he was up to, but when the back of the jailhouse came into view, there was no sign of the man there. The prisoners crooned, and suddenly, from among the trees to our right, came a screech so strident and weird that my hair stood up at it.

"Jungle fowl disturbed," Raffles whispered. "He must have gone into the trees there. Come on!"

But though we prospected around cautiously for quite a while, in the gloom and glimmer of the thickets, we lost our man.

"*And* his brass-studded money-belt," Raffles said wryly. "We should have collared him the *moment* we saw him, Bunny. We'll say nothing of this to our host. Samoan politics are no business of ours. But if we get a second chance at that belt—*that's* our business!"

In the jailhouse, the prisoners crooned on.

To Vailima, on hired horses, proved to be a ride of some miles by a bridle-path that, nar-

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row and rough, serpentined upward through dense and sweltering rain forest. William Haggard told us that R.L.S. had an old white horse called Harry, but seldom rode down to Apia on it, even to get a haircut.

"He's no longer the velvet-jacketed, aesthetic young Scot," Haggard told us, "who took London by storm with *Prince Otto* and *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Those days are gone. He's spent years now as a sea gypsy roaming the Pacific in chartered schooners —the *Casco*, the *Equator* —writing, writing, searching, searching—for a climate he can survive in."

"And a home he can work in," said Raffles, as our horses plodded and jingled up the bridlepath.

"Yes, and the sea gypsy's found it at last," said Haggard, "at Vailima. He's come a long way, R.L.S. He's still only just turned forty, and he has nearly that many books behind him. He owes a lot to his American wife."

" 'Steel-true, blade-straight,' " I said, " 'the Great Artificer made my mate.' "

Haggard nodded. "That's what R.L.S. wrote of her, Manders, in a poem to her. Fanny collaborated on one of his books, you know—*The Dynamiter*. It's a pity you won't meet her, as she's—"

He broke off for, as we rounded a bend in the steep bridlepath, there burst upon us a sight of such ferocity that our horses shied, snorting, at it.

It was a gigantic grimace, a painted visage dangling from a cocoanut-fibre rope slung between trees and squarely barring the way.

"Mataafa's War Mask," said Haggard, as we quieted our horses. "It's a warning to all and sundry that Tusitala's house, Vailima, is under the protection of Chief Mataafa."

"Tusitala's house?" Raffles said.

"The Samoans name for R.L.S.," Haggard explained. "Tusitala means Teller of Tales. He's composed one specially for them—*The Bottle Imp*, the first original tale ever actually written down in the Samoan language. As a matter of fact, we may find some of Mataafa's people at Vailima. They can't hear their friend, Tusitala, read his tale to them often enough."

However, when we reached Vailima, there was nobody to be seen. The burning hush of noon brooded over the old house. Steep steps led up to a palm-thatched verandah. In the stillness the rippling of a waterfall, unseen among the trees crowding close around the

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small clearing, was faintly audible, and I could hear a thin piping sound, as of some musical instrument.

"A flageolet—R.L.S.'s 'penny whistle,' as he calls it," Haggard explained, as we dismounted at the foot of the verandah steps.

From the tawny shade of the verandah, a woman's voice called, "Good day to ye, Mr. Haggard. Hitch your horses, they'll be seen to. *Poë Aamailé*! Go tell Mr. Stevenson that Mr. Haggard's here and he's wi' two friends."

We hitched our horses and followed Haggard up the steps to the verandah, where he introduced us to R.L.S.'s mother, who bore a marked resemblance to our monarch, the Widow of Windsor.

"Ye'll forgive me if I bide in my chair," said the old lady, sparing Raffles and myself, in turn, a hand from her crochet-work. "'Tis a grand chair, this—what my daughter-in-law Fanny calls a patent American rocker. She had it sent from San Francisco for me. She's impetuous wi' her siller, is Fanny." The old lady gave us a keen look. "Ye'll be the Club gentlemen, nae doot, come for Louis's portrait?"

"We're looking forward to seeing it, Mrs. Stevenson," said Raffles.

"Aye, 'tis a braw portrait." The piping of the flageolet fell silent. "There noo, Louis's hae done wi' his penny whistling. He'll be wi' ye in a wee while. Mr. Haggard, show your friends the portrait. 'Tis within, on Fanny's harmonium. Ye ken the way."

We followed Haggard through a bead-curtained doorway from the verandah into a sparsely furnished living-room. Framed photographs of spray-swept lighthouses were yellowing on the walls, along with a large photograph of the stern, side-whiskered old Scottish engineer, R.L.S.'s late father, who had built those lighthouses on the rocky coasts of Mull and Skye and the remote Hebrides.

In marked contrast was the portrait in which Raffles and I had a vested interest. Propped on top of a small harmonium against one wall, the freshly painted canvas, tacked to a stretcher, portrayed a man lankly, painfully thin, with the fine dark eyes and longish hair of a gypsy. In an open-necked shirt, white trousers tucked into mosquito-boots, he stood in tropical sunshine, rolling a cigarette, against the vivid green background of the palm forest.

The bead curtain rattled. We turned.

"Ah, Louis," Haggard said.

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"Here are Raffles and Manders, the Club's envoys."

"The Club has honoured me," R.L.S. said, shaking hands with us. He gestured with a half-rolled cigarette at the portrait. "If any disagreeable member says, 'Stevenson's gone off a lot,' shoot him for me."

"Both barrels," Raffles said. And I added, "Pointblank."

R.L.S. smiled, flipping the gummed edge of his cigarette-paper along his tongue-tip. "William, what's new, down in Apia?"

"Baron and Baroness Von Pilsach are giving a Ball next week," said Haggard, "at the German Consulate. I've received an invitation for myself and my two house guests, Raffles and Manders. And—you, Louis?"

"Not I, William. Not the meddlesome Scot! All the same, my long-range peppering of the British, American, and German press is getting results. Two whole sacks of mail came in for me on the liner. Four per cent jingoistic abuse, two per cent requests for signed copies of *Treasure Island,* the rest —pledges of support from decent public opinion in the three great countries. Given time, just a little more time, and the diplomats will be compelled to revise the Berlin Convention arrangements, and we shall get on the Island Council a voice that speaks strongly for *Samoa* and the *Samoans*—the voice of Chief Mataafa."

"His sub-chiefs are still in the jailhouse, Louis."

"Pray God," said R.L.S., "that Mataafa can keep his other hotheads in check, or—with cruisers in the offing—we know what to expect. But no politics now! You fellows are fresh from London. Give me news of it—of the Clubs, the gin palaces, the Soho cigar divans, the hansom cabs bound for mysterious rendezvous in Thames-side fogs—"

He had the exile's lust for talk, and we indulged it to the full, at luncheon on the verandah, and afterwards we sat long over our claret. When Haggard, Raffles, and I rode off at last, Raffles carrying the portrait of R.L.S., the early stars sparkled over the palm forest, and there followed us for a little way, down the bridlepath from Vailima, the lonely note of the flageolet.

"The German Consulate here, Mr. Manders," said the fulsome lady, a Mrs. Pumphrey-Yeats, with whom I was waltzing to the strains of a Marine band from the cruiser *Kronprinz Eugen*, "is quite the handsomest in Apia. The coloured lanterns in the trees out there,

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if only they weren't *palm* trees, would remind one of the enchanting beer gardens of the Unter-den-Linden. Do you happen to know them, Mr. Manders?"

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Pumphrey-Yeats."

"Ah, well, how *gay* we all are here to-night, Mr. Manders! Baron and Baroness Senfft Von Pilsach are quite the arbiters of our planter society, don't you know. You are seeing us at our best. Everybody who's *any*body in Samoa is here, of course. And it's so pleasant to see new English faces, such as your own and that of your friend, Mr. Raffles."

"It's kind of you to say so, Mrs. Pumphrey-Yeats."

"I see that Mr. Raffles is dancing with the Baroness. Dear Gardi Von Pilsach, with what *dignity* she carries herself! And Baron Senfft, such distinction! A Potsdam moustache, I always think, does so much for the right kind of face."

"Indeed yes, Mrs. Pumphrey-Yeats."

"Tell me, Mr. Manders, have you met our more prominent citizens? The United States Consul? A demon poker-player, they tell me. And our own British Consul, with that *inimitable* Eton manner of his? And poor dear Mr. Cedarcrantz, the Chairman of the Island Council, that large, blond Swedish gentleman with the neutral expression?"

"Yes, I've had the pleasure, Mrs. Pumphrey-Yeats."

"Oh, look! See who's arriving, Mr. Manders. The Navies are in our midst!"

I saw that an influx had occurred of bronzed, handsome Naval officers—Germans, American, and British—magnificent in mess-kit, with gold braid and medals.

"It's an open secret, of course," said Mrs. Pumphrey-Yeats, "that cruisers are lurking in the vicinity—*much* to the reassurance of we planter folk, with Chief Mataafa's followers threatening to cut off our heads just because four malcontents are rightly held in the jailhouse. So unreasonable, the Samoans, but never mind—I expect they will soon *belong* to us, don't you, Mr. Manders?"

Before I could reply, the waltz ended.

"How hot it is to-night!" said Mrs. Pumphrey-Yeats, as I escorted her back to her chair. "I must fan myself vigorously before I make myself agreeable to these handsome mariners. They've been cruising around Samoa for so long, waiting for something to happen, that the poor fellows will need feminine

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help to find their land legs, don't you think?"

"Undoubtedly," I said. "Thank you for the waltz, Mrs. Pumphrey-Yeats."

Mopping beads of relief from my brow with my handkerchief, I turned from her, to find Raffles at my side.

"I've danced with her, too, Bunny," he said. "She's a type the sun never sets on. Come on, you need a drink—there's a buffet in the ante-room."

We were having a drink at the buffet when Mr. Haggard joined us. He looked troubled.

"A messenger just came in," he told us, "and spoke to Mr. Cedarcrantz. I caught a word or two—something about Mataafa's people demonstrating at the jail-house. Cedarcrantz beckoned the three Consuls. They've gone into Von Pilsach's office, taking the three cruiser Captains with them. I don't like the look of it. The Island Council's gone into session."

Two other men joined us just then, and Haggard introduced us, saying that we were leaving in a few days on the liner for San Francisco, taking the portrait of R.L.S.

"It's a pity, Raffles," Haggard said, "but there'll hardly be time for you to meet R.L.S.'s American wife, Fanny. She'll be coming in from Sydney, with her two children, on that liner."

"Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson," Raffles murmured.

Something in his tone made me glance sharply at him, and I saw in his grey eyes a glint that, knowing him as I did, gave me a tingle of foreboding. He said nothing more; but, as the conversation became general, he touched me on the arm and jerked his head, almost imperceptibly, towards the exit.

The band was playing again in the ballroom as we strolled out unobtrusively into the Consulate gardens, where the coloured lanterns glowed among the palm fronds.

"What's on your mind, Raffles?"

"Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson, Bunny. And she's given me an idea."

The lilt of the music faded behind us as we left the Consulate gardens. We walked quickly along the palm-fringed, deserted road. The lamps of bungalows glimmered among the trees. A confused shouting of angry voices became audible. I saw a flare of torches, ahead. The front of the jailhouse came in sight. A crowd seethed before it, in the tossing light of blazing palm-knots. I caught a glimpse of war masks, of brandished, bizarre totems.

On the jailhouse verandah, reached by a steep flight of steps, four Samoan policemen,

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white-uniformed, white-helmeted, with drawn truncheons, faced the crowd. On the steps, a grey-haired Samoan, of magnificent stature, stood with upflung arms, evidently trying to silence the crowd and make himself heard.

Raffles checked. "That must be Chief Mataafa, Bunny. Come on, quick, round the back!"

We dodged off to the left, skirted around through the trees, and gained the back of the jailhouse. The tumult of the crowd at the front sounded like breakers on a reef, but at the back here all was still.

"That night we saw the Tattooed Man, Bunny," Raffles said. "What was he up to with that fishing-reel? And how did he manage to vanish so damned suddenly?"

"He went into the trees," I said. "I remember we heard a bird screech."

"Suppose it was something else that disturbed that bird, Bunny? Suppose *this* is where the Tattooed Man vanished to so suddenly?"

In the evening-dress as he was, Raffles dropped on all fours and crawled in between the squat brick pillars that supported the jailhouse. Mystified, I followed. Weeds grew here. They brushed my face. I thought of snakes, of putting my hand on coils that suddenly writhed and lashed. My flesh crept.

Though the light of the torches, out front, reached in fitfully to us, crawling here under the jailhouse, Raffles was striking matches. He crawled from pillar to pillar, peering at them. Suddenly he checked.

"Fanny Van de Grift, God bless you!" he said. The match went out. "Bunny, remember the title of the book written by Robert Louis *and* Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson?"

"*The Dynamiter*," I said.

"Look!" said Raffles, and struck another match.

"God Almighty!" I said.

"A brick gouged out," said Raffles, "and dynamite packed in. Bunny, which of the representatives of the Three Big W's got tired of waiting for an incident to occur? Which of them bribed the Tattooed Man to *create* an incident, probably leaving it to his local knowledge as to how best to do it?"

"We saw him going out to those cruisers," I said.

"And that same night," Raffles said, "we saw him prowling around here with a fishing-reel. He was making his plans, Bunny, deciding where to plant dynamite. He heard us, and laid low under here. And that damned bird misled us! The man's been back since and planted the dynamite. It was

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wire he had on that reel, Bunny—wire to unreel back, when he attached the detonator, so that he could explode the dynamite from a plunger-box out there among the trees. But he's not yet come back to complete his arrangements."

"Why not?" I said, with a dry throat.

"Because they may not be needed, Bunny. He's probably had a hand in provoking Chief Mataafa's hotheads into rushing the jail and releasing the prisoners. If that happens, there'll be no need to blow up the jailhouse to create an incident serious enough to bring in the Marines of the Three Big W's—and ruin R.L.S.'s singlehanded campaign with his pen." He gripped my arm. "Listen!"

A sudden silence had fallen. Then a mutter of voices began and grew to a great, concerted shout: *"Tusitala!"*

"By God," Raffles said, "Stevenson's out there! Chief Mataafa must have sent word to him for help, and R.L.S. has ridden down from Vailima!"

We crawled forwards a little to get a worm's-eye view. I could see the back of the steps leading down from the jailhouse verandah, in the swaying flares of the torches. And there he was—R.L.S. himself—a lank, long-haired, painfully thin figure, gypsy-like astride a sway-backed old white horse.

R.L.S. was talking to the crowd, talking to them in that voice which so often, so happily, had held them spellbound with *The Bottle Imp*—the voice of Tusitala, Teller of Tales. Though I could hear his voice distinctly, halting yet speaking with passion, what tale he was telling the crowd now I did not know, for the words he had at moments to grope for were words in their own Samoan tongue. And Chief Mataafa took over from him, speaking in a great voice and pointing again and again at the man on the horse.

"Bunny," Raffles whispered, "the mood's changing!"

A murmur ran through the crowd, then burst into a roar of acclamation: "Mataafa! Tusitala!"

The crowd surged forwards, surrounding their Chief and their Storyteller—and Raffles said, "The fever breaks—there'll be no rushing of the jailhouse now!"

Almost as he spoke, a stifled exclamation sounded from behind us. On all fours, we turned our heads quickly—to meet, in the fitful light from the torches out front, the incredulous glare of the Tattooed Man, also on all fours scarcely a yard from us.

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"Ah, good evening," said Raffles. "So you've decided your dynamite's needed, after all, and you've come to attach your wire and detonator?"

Baring his teeth at us in an animal snarl, the tattooed apparition began to crawl rapidly backwards. But Raffles was at him. I flung myself into the fray. We thrashed around in a flurry of arms and legs. The fellow was all muscle. It was like trying to grapple with a giant octopus.

"His belt, Bunny!" Raffles gasped. "Get his belt!"

He was trying to hold the man in a half-nelson. I managed to get the fingers of both my hands under the blackguard's money-belt. I yanked at it with all my strength. The buckle gave way, causing me to jerk back so sharply that my occiput met the brick pillar behind me with an impact that sank my teeth into my tongue and exploded fireworks before my eyes.

I found my face cradled in weeds, and Raffles's voice was in my ears: "Bunny! You all right?"

With an effort, I raised my head, saw Raffles crouched shadowy on all fours before me, and I muttered, with a rapidly swelling tongue, "Where is he?"

"Gone," said Raffles. "I couldn't hold him—and didn't want to. He'll be on the run for his schooner now, and the quicker he gets the anchor up and quits Samoa, the better for all concerned. Come on, let's crawl out from under here, clean ourselves up at Haggard's bungalow, and get back to the Von Pilsach Ball."

"What about the dynamite, Raffles?"

"We'll tell Haggard where it is, Bunny, and how, thanks to Fanny Van de Grift Stevenson, we found it. Haggard can get it removed. But about this money-belt in our possession—not a word, Bunny! We're Englishmen."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"In the money of which of the Three Big W's, Bunny, was the Tattooed Man bribed? In dollars? In deutschmarks? Or in—*pounds sterling*?"

Out front, the crowd rejoiced around R.L.S. and Chief Mataafa as, here under the jailhouse, in the ruddy glow from the flaring pine-knots, we peered tensely at each other on all fours.

"Oh, dear God!" I breathed.

"Exactly! The answer's in this belt," said Raffles. "There's dynamite—*and* dynamite!"

On a foggy night some four months later, for we had taken our time in crossing the United

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States, Raffles and I arrived back in London. Within a couple of hundred yards of the Royal Academy premises, Burlington House, Piccadilly, was The Albany, where Raffles had his rooms. My own flat was in Mount Street, round the corner, but I went into The Albany with Raffles for a drink before we parted.

In his living-room, with its many trophies of a cricketing life, Raffles removed the wrappings from the portrait of R.L.S. and placed it carefully on the bookcase, which contained a complete set of the works, to date, of the exile of Vailima.

His dark hair crisp, his tweeds immaculate, a pearl in his cravat, Raffles poured a couple of whiskey-and-sodas.

"Well, he's pulled it off, Bunny," Raffles said. "R.L.S.'s letters from Vailima, according to today's *Times,* have changed the situation in Samoa. Chief Mataafa is now a strong *Samoan* voice on the Island Council—and, in gratitude to R.L.S., Mataafa's people have made that bridle-path up to Vailima into a passable road for a buggy or pony-trap."

Raffles unfolded *The Times*, which we had read on the boat-train coming up from Southampton.

"This is a remarkable speech he made to them, Bunny. It's about the road, but I think he must have said *something* of the same kind to them, that night at the jailhouse." Raffles read, from the newspaper, " 'Chiefs! Samoans! When I saw you working on this road, my heart grew warm, for I thought I saw here something good for Samoa. Who is the true warrior? It is not the man who kills pigs and wounded men. It is the man who builds roads and plants food trees. And I say to you again—if you do not *use* your country, others will.' "

Raffles glanced for a moment at the portrait on the bookcase, then read on: " 'I have seen these things with my own eyes. I have seen them in Ireland, and I have seen them in the mountains of my own country—Scotland—and my heart was sad. For a time came to them, as it comes now to you, and they were not ready.' "

"Go on, Raffles," I said.

Raffles read on: " 'I love Samoa. I love the land and I love the people. I have chosen them to be my people, to live and die with, and Samoa to be my grave after I am dead. Chiefs! Samoans! The situation has changed. Much of your land is to be restored to you. And so I say to you once more—if you do not *use* it, others will . . . To this day, in Europe, there are

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whole areas that are marsh and bush. And it may be that, after struggling through a thicket, you will come out upon a road as firm and solid as the day it was built—perhaps fifteen hundred years ago—by the Romans. You will see men and women bearing their burdens along that even way. And they give thanks for that convenience, and say to each other that, as the Romans were the greatest of warriors, so also they were the best at building roads.

"'Samoans! *Our* little road is not built to last for a thousand years—yet, in a sense it is, for others will come after us to repair and perpetuate it. Samoans, Tusitala with his pen has worked for you, and you, in return, have shown that you are not too proud to work for gratitude. Tusitala thanks you from his heart. And his hope is that, long after you and I are mingled together in the dust, your descendants will give thanks for the land they receive of their fathers, and will remember and be grateful to those who laboured for them to-day on the road to Vailima.'"

Raffles laid down the newspaper. He picked up from the table the Tattooed Man's money-belt.

"Bunny," he said, "we agreed that we wouldn't examine the contents of this belt till we were back on British soil. And here we are." He looked at me strangely. "Well?"

I hesitated. My palms felt clammy. I swallowed. "Open it," I said.

Raffles unstrapped the belt-pockets. He upturned the belt and shook it. Sheafs of currency notes fell to the table and there slowly unfolded.

We stood gazing down at them. The gaslight seemed to me to shine with an uncanny brilliance. The bell of a passing hansom sounded faintly from fogbound Piccadilly.

"Bunny, we should have foreseen this," Raffles said, at last. "We should have realised that whichever minion it was, whether of Whitehall, Washington, or the Wilhelmstrasse, who got impatient for an incident and paid this bribe to get one, he'd do it with money that couldn't be traced back to him."

I drew in my breath, deeply. Never, as an Englishman, had I felt such a sense of relief.

"Of course," Raffles said, "there's food for thought in the fact that Captains of cruisers showing their flags in the Pacific are supplied, for coaling purposes and so on, with the currencies of all countries whose ports they're likely to

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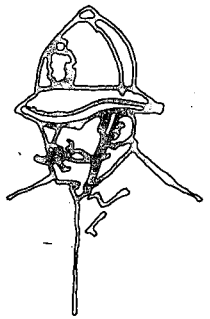
visit. Still, there are other things in life than this, Bunny."

He pushed the money aside, looked meditatively at the portrait on the bookcase, then handed me my glass and took up his own.

"Let's drink to him. Let's drink, Bunny, to a man who stands for those things—on the far side of our horizon. Let's drink to Tusitala," said A. J. Raffles, as we raised our glasses to the portrait, "before we take a look in *The Times* for the current exchange rate of the Japanese yen."



CRIMINALIMERICK

RAFFLES' COMPLAINT

by D. R. BENSEN

"How come the police, my dear Bunny,
To know of my crimes? It's damn funny."
Said Manders, "Ahem . . .
They read EQMM,
Where I detail your exploits for money."

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a *NEW* short story by

HENRY SLESAR

Take out your crystal ball. Pass your hands over and around it slowly. Clasp it gently. Gaze into its depths. What do you see about crime in the future?

You have no crystal ball? Then use Henry Slesar's newest story. Peer into it and see what the future holds . . .

THE KIDNAPING

by HENRY SLESAR

He was called Snoo because of the half sweater he wore. He had found the shredded wooly object in the rubble, blackened by the soot which clung firmly to every inanimate thing left on Earth, and even to the skins of some live things, like his friend Itch. In fact, Snoo thought Itch was black when he first met him on the potato line, scratching away at his poisoned skin, scratching at the lice that didn't seem to mind radiation burns and sores on the meager supply of flesh that Itch still wore on his skeletal body.

He liked the name Snoo. For the sixteen years of his life he had had no name at all, and now he had one, courtesy of the half sweater—half because one arm was completely unraveled and there was a gaping hole in the front, with just the tip of a comical dog's nose showing, and the letters SNOO. When he had seen the cloth poking out of the rubble in the area they called Keepoff because the ground was still too Hot, according to the Bosses (it had been Hot for as long as Snoo remembered, and Itch, too, for that matter, and Itch was a three years older than Snoo), he had shouted with excitement and dug out his treasure, paying no attention to the Keepoff warnings. Anything made of cloth had become precious, and it was a great and wonderful time for him, filling him with so much good will that he had actually made a friend that day.

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(Friends were dangerous encumbrances, sometimes wanting to share your Food.)

But Itch was okay. Snoo was happy in Itch's company. Itch had never had a friend before either, and he forgave Snoo for being three years younger, and therefore three years less hungry.

He quickly found out that Itch was a better thief than he was. Everyone stole, of course—it was only a question of skill and degree. The Bosses had tried to stop it; they had commanded more Dollars for the Copcorps than any other organized activity in the postwar world, but the Copcorps couldn't handle all the petty thievery that formed the vagrants' way of life. And the Vags were the people. The rich ones, the ones with permanent places to live, didn't need Copcorps' protection as much as the Vags did. The Vags stole from each other; the rich ones stayed rich because they wired their fences with electricity, trained their dogs to kill, and practised their marksmanship.

But one day Itch spotted the home of a rich one and made Snoo an incredible proposal.

"Let's take the place," he said.

Snoo honked in disbelief. "Are you crazy? What do you want, ten thousand volts up your backside? Or maybe get your throat torn out by some hound?"

"You haven't even seen the place," Itch said. "You haven't seen what he's got there."

"Whatever he's got, he means to keep."

"Come and see at least," Itch said.

Curious, Snoo followed his friend. It was a long walk; they would miss the evening ration at the compound. They were handing out turnips that night, one to a man, and in a few hours there would be dead Vags without turnips and blood-stained Vags with two. But they skipped the ration and went to see the rich man's place.

Snoo was disappointed. It was a small frame house, with well-barred windows and an outside chimney that was pouring smoke. The thought of an inside fire made Snoo sad and full of longing, even though he had never so much as seen a fireplace. The house was in good repair; the owner had to be a Boss.

The electrified fence around the house wasn't high, maybe six feet, but you could almost feel the tingling tension in those criss-crossed wires. There was a slope that gave them a good view of the back lawn —the grass was scraggly, but almost green—and there was a

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broken swing that would never be repaired again.

And sure enough, as they lay on their stomachs and surveyed the place, they heard the muffled sound of a dog's bark. Snoo had no trouble picturing the animal; the only canine survivors around were small and spikyhaired and toothed like tigers.

"Let's go," Snoo whispered. "What good is this place to us?"

"Wait," Itch said. "You haven't seen what he has here."

"I don't care what he has."

"Wait until you see," Itch said.

Snoo didn't know what he meant until half an hour later when a door slammed and a small plump boy skipped into the back yard. He was laughing in a high-pitched voice. He must have been only six or seven, but he weighed as much as either Snoo or Itch. The dog was romping with him, a skeletal beast, all fur and teeth. He was probably his only playmate, and he was gentle with the boy. But Snoo and Itch knew that the hound would turn into a snarling, tearing death machine if they got within range.

"Look at him," Snoo whispered. "Look at that fat little kid. Look at the cheeks on him, those legs."

"Shoes," Itch said. "Did you notice he's even wearing shoes?"

Snoo looked at his friend, read his intentions in his eyes, and quickly shook his head.

"No, Itch, it can't be done. Not with that fence and that dog! And his old man probably has a Gun."

"Sure he has," Itch said. "He's a rich one. He's got Dollars. Enough to own a house and a Gun and a dog and a back yard for his kid to play in. But we're going to snatch that fat little kid, Snoo."

"How?"

Itch grinned. "I've been coming around here for weeks and I got it figured out."

Snoo, turnip-hungry, was getting irritated. "Tell me how."

"The fence is off," Itch said. "The Man turns off the juice when the kid comes out to play. He has to do that or the kid could get fried. Doesn't that make sense?"

Snoo nodded. "All right. So the fence is off."

"That's when we can do it, when the kid is in the back yard and the dog is inside the house and the juice isn't on. We take the fence, take the kid, and take off—"

"And the Man? You think he won't hear the kid yelling and let the dog out?"

"Sure, he'll hear something and he'll let the dog out. Only

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the dog won't go for me, he'll go for *you*."

"What?"

Itch was grinning now.

"You'll be outside the fence, see, and I'll be inside with the kid. And you'll draw the dog's attention! You'll make him jump for you while I drag the kid over the fence—"

"You're crazy, Itch. It won't work."

"It'll work," Itch said dreamily, as if he had performed the feat a hundred times. "I grab the kid and drag him over the fence, and then we have him and he'll be worth plenty. Think about it, Snoo, just think about it."

Snoo thought about it. He looked down the slope into the back yard. The kid had his dog by the tail, spinning him around, giggling at his playful growls.

"All right," Snoo said, his stomach filled with pain. "When do we do this thing?"

"We'll start tomorrow," Itch said.

They had to wait four days before the boy reappeared in the back yard again, and seven days before he came out without the hound. It forced them to miss four ration lines, and their bodies ached, and their vision suffered, and they were almost narcotized into non-being as they lay on their stomachs on the slope near the house.

But the day came, and the kid was there, and their minds were suddenly alert even if their bodies could barely respond to the commands of their brains.

"He's alone!" Itch whispered. "He's out there alone, and that means the power is off—it has to be!"

"Couldn't we test it?" Snoo said nervously. "Couldn't we find out somehow?"

"There's only one way to find out," Itch said, and slid down the slope toward the underbrush that bordered the fence.

Snoo hesitated, then followed, moving to the section of the fence that had been designated as his station. He was breathing so noisily he was sure the kid would hear him, but the boy didn't seem aware of either of them—not of Itch who was already within a foot of the electrified fence, ready to risk his life for their plan, not of Snoo, who was ready to distract the dog when and if it came bounding out of the back door.

Then Snoo saw the ripple in the wire and knew that Itch had challenged it; he was climbing the fence, and it hadn't killed him. Itch had been right!

A moment later he saw the plump little boy turn from the

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broken swing, and he was looking at Itch, slouching toward him, smiling, his manner friendly, and Snoo thought it might be easier than they thought. The boy wasn't screaming for help; maybe he never would.

Itch's blackened face split into a grimace; his yellowed teeth, the few remaining, looked almost white. The kid watched him curiously, with no fear.

But when Itch reached out a hand to the boy, the kid began to yell. Itch reacted at once, snaking out his whip-thin arms to encircle the small body, and guiding his bony hand to cover the boy's mouth.

"Randy!"

Snoo heard the Man's voice, and then heard it again as the door opened. But the second time his cry was obscured by the howl of the dog as it came rushing out of the house, eager to rip and tear, and Snoo rattled the wire fence and bellowed at the animal. The dog responded at once and rushed for the intruder he could see and smell.

It was working! Snoo thought triumphantly: but then his heart shriveled as he saw that Itch couldn't control the writhings of the plump little boy, only six years old but strong with feeding. The boy was almost as strong as Itch, and soon the Man would be out with the Gun, and it would all be finished.

Snoo looked at the raging dog running toward him and wondered if he should abandon the whole thing, leave Itch there and climb back up the slope and run as fast as he could back to the compound and forget all about friendship and Kidnaping and Crime beyond his competence—

But then a wonderful thing happened. The dog hurled itself against the fence and a million sparks flew from its fur. A terrible cry, a howl from hell, came out of its throat and it fell smoking to the ground, the tiger teeth clamped on its own protruding black tongue, and Snoo realized that the Man had electrified the fence in the hope of killing his intruders. But all he had killed was his dog.

Even more important, the fence had been short-circuited; the fire in its veins was temporarily burned out, and the fuse had to be replaced. Now there was time for Itch to force the boy to the fence and drag him over it. Snoo came rushing to help, praying that there would be enough time, and there was.

They had the boy up the slope minutes before the fence was juiced again, before the

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Man himself exploded out of the house with the Gun under his arm, but with no target to shoot at, no dog to bark for him, no fat little boy to play in his back yard.

Itch and Snoo were so jubilant at their success that they could do little more than laugh wildly, insanely, even while they bound their captive, hands, feet, and mouth, to keep him from struggling, running, or crying out. Then they dropped to the ground, exhausted, out of breath, deprived even of the strength to discuss the future. But there was little doubt about it. They had done their difficult work, and they had earned their reward, and they would enjoy it for as long as it would last. Eating only once a day, sparingly, they should have enough for almost a month.

"Q"

NEXT MONTH....

13 NEW stories — including

HUGH PENTECOST *(about Jericho)*

EDMUND CRISPIN *(about a 19th Century crime)*

EDWARD D. HOCH *(about Interpol)*

RUTH RENDELL *(about a clinging woman)*

and some Sherlockian surprises by

P. G. WODEHOUSE

MILES KINGTON

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QUEEN'S QUISINE: Part Two

Well, we've brewed a pretty kettle of vittles. In our August 1974 issue we published *Queen's Quisine* (suggested by Michael Avallone) and asked readers to choose their own favorite mystery writers and characters and put them into the restaurant business (as in THE CREASEY SPOON). The response was remarkable, in quantity and quality. Here are some of the Criminous Cafés and Detective Diners suggested by EQMM readers:

Chris Tea Room
Michael's Inne
Kentucky Colonel March
Ida Cohen Selavan
Pittsburgh, Pa.

Tey and Crumpet Shoppe
John A. Cardin
New York, N.Y.

Lizzie Borden's Chop House
E. H. Volkart
Kailua, Hawaii

Stout's Rextaurant
Frances A. Dougherty
Jackson, Louisiana

Reggie's Fortune Cookery
E. Rasmus
Vallejo, Calif.

Czissar's Palace
The Corner (Old Man, Prop.)
Ellen Betty Brink
Venice, Florida

Biggers' Burgers
Bonnie McDonnell
Philadelphia, Pa.

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Malone's Rice Bar
Betty K. Sassman
Greenlawn, N.Y.

Kelley's Roost
Stuart Palmer House
The Charlotte Arms
N. F. Bercher
Toledo, Ohio

The Teyhouse of the August Moon
Isabelle Mazur
Long Island City, N.Y.

Robert Barr and Grill
Rine Hearth
Joseph Reilly
Plainfield, N.J.

The Avallone Shell (Noon Lunches Served)
George S. Grosser
Longmeadow, Mass.

Fuman's Chew and Chat
J. L. Biggers
Lubbock, Texas

gRand Hotel
Della Street's Deli
Anne H. Devlin
Margaretville, N.Y.

Club Carr
John Rhode House
The Father Brown Derby
Arthur H. Parson
Honolulu, Hawaii

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a *NEW* Petrella story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

first publication in the United States

Like most policemen and detectives, Petrella had his "own private, scrupulously guarded, never-to-be-mentioned list of informers." Absolute confidentiality was the unwritten law. And this time Petrella needed the help of one of his stool pigeons to catch a "nasty little collection of thugs" who called themselves the Cats and who specialized in shop robberies and in clawing the faces of nice old ladies who kept their shops open late at night . . .

THE PROPHET AND THE BIRD

by MICHAEL GILBERT

The Prophet appeared on an evening of late summer. He drifted along the sun-warmed pavement of High Street, dressed in the remains of five good suits clobbered together with string. His beard, which veiled the area between his lower lip and his top waistcoat button, was the color of badly worn snow.

Across his shoulder he bore a staff, to the upper end of which was tacked a disk of plywood. On one side red letters on black said: *Smite and Spare Not*. On the obverse was *Suffer Little Children*, in yellow on blue.

The Prophet was suffering little children. A small group was following him, open-mouthed, up the pavement. Every few minutes he would stop to address them, and the children would retreat. They were not out to annoy him. They were just waiting for him to do something.

Detective Constable Patrick Petrella was on his way to keep an appointment when he saw the Prophet. Like all detectives,

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he had his own private, scrupulously guarded, never-to-be-mentioned list of informers. Useful contacts; some in the underworld, some on the fringes of it, some quite respectable, but with a talent for meddling or a spiteful mind.

A few of them sold information coldly, for money. But the payment was so small and the risks were so great that some more complex motive than greed must have been at work in their dark minds.

So that he should never slip into mentioning their real names, Petrella spoke and wrote and thought of them by nicknames. There was the one-legged paper seller—Pegleg—and the big tawny doorman at the local cinema—Leo; and there was the Bird. The Bird was the best of the lot, the only one so far who had never let him down.

It was the Bird he was meeting that evening at ten o'clock in a cul-de-sac off the less-frequented end of High Street. If the Bird was willing to sing both loudly and clearly, then it was possible—just possible—that a nasty little collection of thugs, who wore black pantomime masks and carried fish-hooks in their cuffs and called themselves the Cats, might be put where they belonged for a year or two.

The Cats were specialists in shop robbery. They attacked old women in backstreet shops, the sort that stay open until all hours. Small dark shops in small dark streets, which often have a surprising amount of money in the till.

He was in plenty of time. The gate in the wall had been left unpadlocked and he eased it open, slipped through, and shut it behind him. It was a small timber yard, on the slope that ran down to the railway, and it was well situated for such meetings.

Good contacts could never be hurried. Petrella spread out his raincoat and sat down on it. He had spent some hours the previous evening with a nice old lady who had had her face pulled open by the Cats' claws, and for a chance of getting back at them he was prepared to wait a long time.

An occasional electric train curled by, sparking up out of the mist, oddly silent, teetered on the points, and disappeared like a cheerful ghost under the road bridge where High Street crossed the line. Petrella lit his pipe. An increase of noise on the other side of the fence suggested that the pubs were shutting.

It was at about this time that the landlord of the Feathers

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looked at his clock and made a sign to his assistant. It meant: "Any trouble, you slip out and fetch a policeman." The assistant edged toward the serving door.

"Now, gentlemen," said the landlord. "For the third and last time . . ."

There were five of them at the table in the window. The one they called Len was perhaps 30. He had a hard, white, Londoner's face, sloe-black eyes, and a lack of expression that was more frightening than the animation of the four youngsters with him. They were all drinking whiskey. Even Jimmy Middleton who hardly looked his 16 years.

"Don't you hear the gentleman, Len? He says it's time."

"See if you can get another round, Jimmy," suggested Len.

The boy gathered up the five thin glasses in his right hand, a finger in each, and drew them together with a crack. Holding them so, he walked to the counter, stretched out his hand, and opened it. The glasses clattered down on the polished wood. For a moment after he had dropped them, his hand remained, the fingers bent, like a big claw.

"Same again, chum," he said.

"It's ten minutes' past time now."

"Len," said the boy over his shoulder. "Gentleman says no."

"Ask him if he wants that luvverly new window of his pushed in," said Len. "Tell him I might lean against it on the way out." Where the others had drunk themselves happy, he had drunk himself quiet and ugly.

The landlord looked quickly over his shoulder, and his assistant ducked through the door. But Len saw him go.

He climbed to his feet, walked across to the bar, and said, "The boy friend's gone for help? All right. Don't bother about that drink. We'll put it on the slate this time."

He shook his sleeve, then drew his hand twice, firmly, across the bar counter. The landlord was still staring at the cross, cut a clean half inch into the polished wood, when the door slammed behind the last of the boys. He wiped his forehead with the beer cloth, and breathed out deeply.

On the pavement the little army gathered itself together.

"Blow me down," said Jimmy, "there's that Prophet. We oughter do something about that beard of his. Can't be healthy. What say we trim it for him, Len?"

He broke off. Len wasn't looking at the Prophet. His eyes were on a spot in the shadows, ten yards along the

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pavement. He moved quickly. The woman looked over her shoulder, seemed half inclined to run for it, then stopped.

Len walked right up to her. She stepped backward, into the deep doorway of a shop. Len continued to advance until his face was almost touching hers. "Who've you been drinking with tonight?" he said.

"I never."

"Soon as my back's turned, you're out of the house boozing with some pretty boy."

"I came out to buy some cigarettes."

"Who've you been with?"

"I haven't been with anyone." Her head was twisting from side to side, hopelessly. She was not looking for help. She was nerving herself for what was to come.

A sudden, wicked, stinging slap on the side of the face. Then another. She shook her head. There was a small dark drop of blood where Len's ring had cut her cheek open.

"Are you going to talk?" said Len. "Or do you want I should use the knuckles on you?"

"Leave that woman alone," said a deep voice. The Prophet loomed in the doorway.

Len looked up. The madness slowly left him. "You go and chase yourself," he said. "She's my wife. I can talk to her if I want."

"I say you shall not strike her," said the Prophet.

"Fix him," said Len shortly.

It was a good fight while it lasted. One against five is long odds, but the Prophet had a staff and knew how to use it. His first scything movement cut the nearest boy's legs from under him, and his second put Jimmy Middleton backward into a shop window. After that he used the point. When the police arrived and the boys scattered, he was still on his feet.

Petrella, aroused by the sound of breaking glass, had climbed onto a crate and watched the proceedings over the fence. He saw no reason to interfere. When it was all over he collected his raincoat, came softly out, and went home to bed. He realized that it was no use waiting any longer for the Bird that night.

The Cats hung out in a loft above a junk store in Parson Street. It was a good place for them because it had six different ways in and out. And they knew them all. Here Len dispensed justice and wisdom to his followers. Sober, he was something of a tactician. Under his rule the Cats had learned to steal only money. And to spend it steadily, not in sudden, suspicious bouts of affluence.

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He had taught them that the clinching argument was a blow. You go in, he said, and you ask for sutthink that costs a few bob and you give 'em a pound note, see? That means they got to open the till. Right? Then you smash 'em, grab what's in the till, and beat it. No clever stuff.

Under his guidance they had prospered. Until recently.

Then came the carefully planned, combined operation against a larger shop, with a manager and two girl assistants, which might have been black disaster. At the very last moment, warned by some underground sense, Len had called it off. He had then spotted round by himself and spotted the police car parked behind the billboard across the way.

He had also seen something else. A John the Baptist, in beard and rags, motionless at the end of the street.

"Someone put the finger on us," he said. "And I'm wondering just who."

"Must have been that flickering Prophet," said one of them.

"Could be," said Len. "Might have been young Jimmy."

They looked up to see if he was joking; his face was expressionless as a washed dish. "Why would it be Jimmy?"

"I didn't say it was," said Len. "I said it might be. He's friends with that dick, ent he? I seen 'em talking the other day. He's so young he doesn't think what he's saying, perhaps."

Jimmy Middleton came in at this moment. He usually took the route across the roof and through the skylight because he was still young enough to enjoy climbing for its own sake. This time he was in a hurry, so he came up through the trap door.

"I did what you said," he explained. "I watched the back door and slipped by when the old woman—"

"Cut the narrative," said Len. "Tell us what you found."

Jimmy, deflated, said, "You know all that old clobber he wears, rags and pieces? Well, he's got a nice suit in his wardrobe. And shirts and shoes and socks. And—and something else."

He held his right hand out and they crowded round him. It was the last, the ultimate argument. A small old-fashioned blue-plated automatic pistol.

"And it's loaded," said Jimmy.

"I'd better look after that," said Len. No one demurred. He slipped it into his pocket. "What's your idea about this geezer, Jimmy?"

"I think he's a copper," said Jimmy. "You know—a ghost. Someone they've planted here."

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There was an uneasy silence in the loft. It was exactly as if a shadow had stalked across the room.

"What say we lie low for a bit, Len?" said one of the boys.

"Nuts," said Len. The weight in his pocket gave him confidence. "He's no copper. He's a cheap stoolie. When I'm finished with him he'll wish he was back wherever it was he came from. First thing, we want to find out what he's up to. Right? We take it in turns. One of us watch him all the time. Use your loaf. Keep out of sight. We'll soon see what he's at. Then we can fix him."

If the Prophet knew he was being watched, he gave no sign of it. Most of his day he spent, as before, drifting quietly along the pavements of Pound End and Highside, going no farther north than the Main Circular Road, sometimes dropping south as far as the railway terminals and warehouses of Sonning Town. But most of the time he spent with the children, and they, with the instinct of the streets, seemed to realize he meant them no harm. Hour after hour they would follow him, an early and unusual Father Christmas, carrying no sack of toys, but big with infinite possibilities of mystery.

"He talks to them," said Petrella.

"As long as he only talks," said big Sergeant Gwilliam.

"The Matron of the Highside Children's Home got a bit worried at first. He hangs round them a lot. But from what I can make out he does no harm."

"Loitering with intent?"

Petrella considered the matter, but shook his head. Although, as a policeman, he had a well-founded distrust of any unknown character who hung about for long doing nothing, this didn't make sense. "There's nothing to steal," he said. "The place is just full of kids and beds and bedpans—"

"Different thing five years ago when it was a private house. Old Sir Louis Borderer. Then it *would* have been worth a go."

Petrella cast his mind back. "He was the collector, wasn't he? Dead some years now. A lot of his stuff went to a museum."

"That's right," said Sergeant Gwilliam. "It was before my time. I was in South London then. Why?"

"Was there ever a burglary there? A big one?"

"I expect so," said Gwilliam. "There was plenty worth stealing. Records would be able to tell you. Why?"

"Just an idea," said Petrella.

Sergeant Gwilliam looked at

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him suspiciously. He distrusted young detective constables who got ideas.

Petrella went off to look for the Bird, who had been somewhat elusive lately. He had a feeling that some useful information might by now be forthcoming from that source.

The Matron at Highside Children's Home was a single-minded extrovert. A daily life spent in grappling with Local Authorities, keeping together an underpaid staff, and composing the difficulties of a hundred children left her with little time for reflection.

There came a time in every day, though. The last half hour before she sought her own bed, when her charges were asleep and the telephone had stopped wrangling. She liked to spend it out in the summerhouse.

It was a beautiful little baroque temple, lovingly transported, stone by stone, from its native Arezzo by the enthusiastic Sir Louis as a wedding present for his third wife. In it he had placed, as a sort of table, a pediment of great antiquity, unearthed at Capua: a heavy square of old hewn stone. On it the Matron would place her knitting bag, her spare glasses, and her evening newspaper. Beside it she erected her deck chair.

Her thoughts, as usual, were on the problems of the day. That funny old man. She was inclined to believe the children when they said he meant no harm. Sometimes he talks to us, Lizzie Ferrers had said. Sometimes he asks us questions. What about? Oh, anything. Getting-up time. Mealtimes. Bedtime. The routine of the home. Very odd, thought the Matron.

Looking up, she saw him. Clear, in the bright moonlight. Then he was gone. He had dodged in among the trees on the far side of the lawn.

Her first thought was to go back and ring for the police. Being a resolute woman, she decided to wait for a moment, and watch. The back door of the summerhouse led directly to the garden door of the main house and there was no chance of being cut off. And there was something else, too. The Matron had spent part of her professional life in a home for old people, and as the Prophet came out again into the moonlight at the edge of the trees, she noticed that he was holding himself and moving like a man of half his age.

The next thing she saw was that he was not alone. There were flitting figures behind him. She decided that it was time to move.

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As she turned, the attack developed. Two men flung themselves at the Prophet, who whirled to meet them. A twisting knot of figures went to the ground with a thud that could be heard clear across the intervening distance.

As the Matron panted up to the garden door, she received a further shock. A police car was already coming up the drive. Sergeant Gwilliam jumped from it before it had stopped.

"They're over there." She pointed. "Fighting. Quick, and you'll get them."

"They won't get out without wings," said the sergeant. "We've had the place surrounded for an hour."

He disappeared with his followers at the double. The Matron went in and mixed herself a strong drink of brandy from the emergency store.

Superintendent Haxtell counted up the score later that evening with Sergeant Gwilliam and Petrella, who had got too close to a flailing Len and had picked up a black eye and a broken nose. They were in the Matron's sitting room, which had been turned into a temporary first-aid post.

"First," said the Superintendent, "we've got the Prophet, alias ninety-five other things, who came out of Parkhurst three weeks ago where he'd been doing a long stretch for burglary. As soon as we get him out of hospital we'll charge him with—what?"

"Being on enclosed premises," suggested Sergeant Gwilliam.

"I suppose so. I take it that it's some sort of felony to try and re-steal stolen goods."

"Would you very much mind explaining what it's all about?" said the Matron.

"Certainly, ma'am," said the Superintendent. "This house used to belong to Sir Louis Borderer. Just before his death the Prophet broke in and cleaned up Sir Louis's collection of Italian court jewelry—good old-fashioned stuff, gold and diamonds mostly. He was picked up two days later and charged. Most of the loot was never discovered. The police took all his known hiding places to pieces, brick by brick. No good. It was even hinted that he might get a remission if he talked. He preferred to take the full rap. He reckoned the stuff was safe enough. It had never left the grounds. He'd lifted that pedestal in the summerhouse and shoved it in the hollow underneath."

"Do you mean to say," said the Matron, "that sort of table thing I put my knitting on?"

"That's right, ma'am. Tonight, when he saw the game

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was up, he told us. I reckon he calculated we couldn't put him away twice for the same job. Which may be right."

"And those others?"

"Ah," said the Superintendent. "There we're on much firmer ground. Breaking, with intent, and violence. And the leader was armed. He had a loaded gun in his pocket. That ought to take care of *him*."

"Well," said the Matron, "all I can say is that it's very lucky you happened to be there."

"Very lucky indeed," said Superintendent Haxtell blandly. Later that evening he talked to Petrella.

"It came out very nicely, didn't it?" said Petrella happily. "They'd left young Jimmy outside, on guard, and he got away. We might pull him in, too—but I think it would be better, don't you, to leave him out of this charge?"

"If you say so," said the Superintendent. "Any particular reason?"

"Well, they're bound to work out that *someone* gave them away," said Petrella. "Their first idea was the Prophet. But, of course, as it turned out, it couldn't have been him. Then, I think, they suspected Jimmy. They knew the boy was friendly with me. If we let him off, they'll be sure they were right."

"Yes," said the Superintendent slowly. "Yes, I suppose that is the best way. May lead to trouble in the future."

It would lead to a lot worse trouble, thought Petrella, if Len ever realized that his wife was the Bird.

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a *NEW* Captain Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

When a man is a professional policeman, he's never really off duty, never far from death under mysterious circumstances. So even when Captain Leopold went back home to attend the funeral of his Uncle Joe, he found himself more than a mourner—or as his cousin Sara said, "too much of a detective who saw things where there's nothing to be seen" . . .

CAPTAIN LEOPOLD GOES HOME

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Fletcher and Connie were at the office to see him off, their faces grim. "There's no need for tears," Captain Leopold told them both. "I haven't seen my uncle in something like twenty years. He was seventy-eight years old and he had a good life. I'll fly out for the funeral and be back in the office on Monday."

Fletcher walked him down to the street. "Don't you worry about a thing, Captain. Connie and I have everything under control. Stay as long as you want. It's been a slow month anyway."

That wasn't quite true because August was never slow for the Violent Crimes Division, but Leopold thanked him anyway. He waved goodbye as the taxi pulled away from the curb, taking him to the airport, and from there on to home.

Captain Leopold had always thought of Riger Falls as home even though he'd been born in Chicago and moved from Riger Falls to New York as soon as he was old enough to be on his own. The reason was Uncle Joe Leopold, who'd raised him like a son after the Captain's parents died. He'd gone to live with Uncle Joe when he was eight, and taken the town of Riger Falls as his own.

Its shaded streets and quiet country atmosphere were a world away from the noisy crowded avenues of Chicago, and the young Leopold wel-

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comed the change. Now, flying back after all these years, he looked forward to the quiet as something close to a vacation. He tried to remember Uncle Joe's face the last time he'd seen him, back in the mid-fifties when Uncle Joe's wife died. She'd been almost like a mother to Leopold and her death had saddened Joe terribly. One of the greatest surprises of Captain Leopold's young life had come when he learned a year later that Uncle Joe had remarried.

He'd never met the second wife, though she was the one who'd signed the telegram informing him of his uncle's death. Her name was Margaret, and Leopold knew only that she was a good deal younger than Joe. When the plane landed and he saw from the bus schedule that he would not reach Riger Falls before dinner he phoned her from a booth at the airport.

"We're so glad you could come," her voice assured him. "Joe was always talking about you and what a success you've become in the east."

"He was like a father to me," Leopold said. "Look, I'll be there as soon as I can, but it'll probably be after seven. I'll take the next bus."

"Henry will meet you at the station. That's my son."

"Fine." He hung up and went out to wait for the next bus to Riger Falls.

In the long evening sunshine his first view of the town was a reassuring one. The trees, the streets, the houses were all as he remembered them. Progress had not yet polluted the place where he grew up. Farther on, near the center of town, he came upon one concession to change—a sprawling shopping center with a supermarket and a drive-in movie. But even here the design of the place was muted, in keeping with its quiet surroundings. Riger Falls had always been a quiet town, if nothing else.

A thin well-dressed man was waiting at the bus station and he introduced himself as Henry Cole. He was a few years younger than Leopold, perhaps still under 40, but he carried himself with a round-shouldered stoop that made him seem older. "I'm Margaret's son by her first marriage," he explained. "I live down the old Creek Road."

Leopold remembered the area—a dirt road lined with older houses that were little more than shacks. But that was a long time ago. Perhaps things were different now. "I haven't been back in twenty years," he told the man. "Haven't seen Uncle Joe in all that time."

"He was a fine old guy,"

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Henry Cole said. "Too bad he had to die like that."

"How did he die?" Leopold asked. The telegram had given no details.

"Hit by a car on Tuesday, right in front of his house. They didn't think he was too bad at first, but at that age it was a terrible shock to his system. Died in the hospital yesterday morning."

"Who hit him?"

"Don't know. One of them wild kids from the next county, I suppose. That's what the sheriff says, anyway."

"You mean it was a hit-and-run?"

"That's what they say. My mother was in the house when it happened. She says he just went across the street to mail a letter and then she heard this car racing down the street. And then a thump. She says the car never even slowed down."

"Was he conscious? Could he say anything?"

"I don't know. You'd have to ask my mother." He turned the car into a gravel driveway. "Here we are. Raznell's Funeral Home."

Leopold looked out the car window at the familiar white Colonial structure. "Is Jerry Raznell still around?" Jerry had been his boyhood friend all through school, until Leopold moved away to New York.

"It's his place. The father died."

Inside, in a coffin surrounded by flowers, Uncle Joe Leopold lay at rest. Leopold said a brief silent prayer and then went over to the white-haired woman who stood with the other mourners. Though they'd never met, he recognized Margaret Leopold at once from the pictures Uncle Joe had sent him.

"So glad you could come," she said, extending her hand. "Joe would be so happy to know you're back home."

"I'm only sorry it took this to bring me back."

"He often spoke of you, and how successful you are." When she spoke, the lines of her mouth gave her a certain graceful air. Twenty years ago, about the time Uncle Joe married her, she would have been a beautiful woman. Even now, Leopold thought, she bore herself with a handsome dignity.

"Had he been retired for long?" Leopold asked, remembering Uncle Joe's fondness for the little woodworking shop on the highway.

"Only about a year. And even then he could have kept going in. His health was near perfect and he still loved furniture."

"Your son told me about the accident. A terrible thing. Do the police have any idea who was driving the car?"

"None. Maybe you should talk to the sheriff about it. He might like some help from a New York detective."

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Leopold cleared his throat. "I started out in New York, but I've been up in Connecticut for a good many years now. Not nearly as large as New York. But maybe I will speak to him." Some others drifted in to pay their respects, and for a time Leopold was caught up in a flow of memories, hearing the old names, seeing the half-remembered faces. It was not until after nine that he could get away. Margaret Leopold asked him to stay at the house but he declined, preferring the freedom of a motel room.

"You can use my car overnight," Henry Cole volunteered. "Here are the keys."

Leopold hesitated. "I don't know—"

"Go ahead. It'll save me taking you to the motel and picking you up for the funeral."

Leopold accepted the keys with thanks. As he turned to leave, the familiar face of Jerry Raznell appeared in the doorway. "Leopold! Good to see you! I heard you'd flown out for the funeral."

"You haven't changed, Jerry," he said, and he meant it. Always a bit on the stocky side, Raznell's added weight had helped maintain the jolly boyishness of his face. He was hardly anyone's idea of the town undertaker.

"Nor have you. A little gray at the temples, but you still look pretty fit. How's the wife?"

Had it been that long since they'd seen or talked to each other? "It was a short marriage. We got a divorce and she's dead now."

"Oh. Sorry." The grin disappeared, but only for an instant. "Say, I'm just closing up here. How about stopping for a drink? Get caught up on all these years. I'd invite you upstairs but one of the kids is sick."

"I have to check in at a motel."

"No problem. I'll show you the way. It's new since you lived here."

The motel was on the other side of town, part of a nationwide chain that had somehow discovered the rural pleasures of Riger Falls. Leopold checked in, deposited his small overnight bag on the bed, and joined Jerry Raznell in the dimly lit cocktail lounge for a drink.

"It was a shock about your uncle, huh?"

"It should have been more of a shock," Leopold confessed. "In recent years I'd almost forgotten the old man's existence. And once he was a father to me."

"We all grow up and get old. My own father died seven years ago and left me the business."

"You seem to be doing well. I

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noticed a new wing on the house."

"People never stop dying."

"I hear Uncle Joe got it from a hit-and-run driver."

"Yeah. Awful thing."

"Are the police investigating?"

A shrug. "You know Sheriff Potter. No, on second thought, I guess you don't. He'd have been after your time. Well, he's a good enough man, but he has his own ideas. Wild kids from the next county, he says, and a lot of people believe him."

"I gather you don't."

"I'd rather not say."

"You think it was somebody here in Riger Falls?"

Jerry Raznell looked down at his hands. "You'd better ask the sheriff about that."

"I came here to attend a funeral, Jerry, not to investigate a killing."

"I know. I shouldn't have said anything."

"You didn't," Leopold told him. "Maybe you *should* say something."

"You'd better ask the sheriff," he repeated.

Leopold downed the rest of his Scotch. "I'll do that. Thanks for the drink, Jerry."

Sheriff Potter was not in his office, but the night deputy furnished his home address. Leopold phoned first and identified himself. Shortly after ten o'clock, when he parked Henry Cole's car in front of the sheriff's neat little ranch home, the man was waiting for him.

"The wife's having her bridge club," he explained. "Come on out in the garage."

It was a double garage with one side given over to a workbench and power tools. Sheriff Potter left the overhead door open while they talked, and large moths began to circle above their heads, risking their powdery wings against the attractive glow of the ceiling light.

With his curly black hair and dimpled chin, Potter did not look like a sheriff. He was too young for one thing, and when he spoke there was something like deference in his voice. "I've heard about you, Captain. Weren't you written up in *Law and Order* recently?"

"They ran an article on our department," Leopold admitted, "about how we converted the old homicide squad into a violent crimes unit."

"I read everything I can find about police work. Not that I have much call to use it in Riger Falls."

"I was wondering about my uncle's hit-and-run death. I understand it's still unsolved."

Sheriff Potter ran his hand over the smooth wood of the

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work table. "Well, not exactly unsolved. For one thing, the car didn't kill him right off, you know. He died a couple days later in the hospital. Case like that, in order to get an indictment we'd have to bring doctors before the grand jury to testify that the accident was the prime cause of death."

"Wasn't it?"

"Well, the man was seventy-eight years old. Doesn't take much to kill somebody at that age, you know. A broken hip, a sudden shock—"

"Do you know who was driving the car that hit him?"

"We get a lot of kids from the next county along that road, especially on these warm summer nights. My road patrol does the best it can, but you know how it is sometimes."

Leopold sighed. "Look, Sheriff, I've been back in town only three hours and a good friend tells me to ask you about my uncle's death. Well, I'm asking you."

Sheriff Potter scratched his head. "You gotta look at these things on balance sometimes. Your uncle was a good man, but he was seventy-eight years old. He'd lived a full life. Now if some young kids out joyriding hit him and caused his death, through no real fault of their own, should their lives be ruined by it?"

"That's an odd theory of law," Leopold said. "Is that what happened?"

"I don't know what happened."

"Didn't my uncle make a statement before he died?"

"Nothing we could use. He never saw the car that hit him."

Leopold could sense he was getting nowhere with the man. If there was something strange and hidden about his uncle's death, this was not the place to learn about it. "All right," he said, starting for the door. "Nice meeting you."

The sheriff walked him out to the borrowed car. "How long you expect to be in town?"

"I'll be leaving after the funeral," Leopold said. "Sometime tomorrow."

The following morning Leopold's cousin Sara arrived in town for the funeral. She was a handsome woman in her mid-forties, a wealthy widow who had been involved in one of Leopold's cases a few years earlier. "You're looking good, Sara," he said, greeting her with a cousinly kiss.

"And so are you. It's good to see you again."

They entered the funeral parlor and he nodded to Jerry Raznell, attired in a black coat and gray striped pants, looking

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a bit more like a smiling best man at a marriage ceremony than a funeral director. Margaret Leopold was already seated, but she rose to greet Sara and a few other arrivals. Her son Henry Cole was not yet present.

"I'll want you to ride with me in the first car," Margaret said to Leopold. "You were very close to Joe."

He nodded and sat down next to her. Jerry Raznell came in after a few moments and said a brief prayer. Then he began reading off the list of cars and occupants. Henry Cole was behind the wheel of the first car when they reached it. He nodded to Leopold, came out, and held the door open for his mother. As Leopold climbed in he saw a blue and white sheriff's car at the end of the line. He wondered if Potter was inside it.

The service at the graveside was brief and nonsectarian. Leopold found himself standing next to cousin Sara and when it was over she said, "Will you buy me lunch? I'd feel uneasy going back to the house."

"Of course. There used to be a nice restaurant out by the falls." He drove back with Cole and Margaret to the house, then borrowed Cole's car again with the promise to return it shortly. Sara was waiting for him back at the funeral parlor.

"I'd forgotten how weird this town was," she said as she settled into the seat next to him.

"It never seemed weird to me."

"Well, that's because you lived here. I was only a summer visitor. One of the outsiders."

He drove her to the Fall View Inn, a rambling old place that had been the town's best restaurant in his youth. The prices were high, but a certain seediness had begun to set in. The antique furniture that greeted them at the entrance was covered with dust just a little too thick for mere atmosphere. The falls were still there, of course, dropping the slim trickle of water that gave the town its name.

"It was a nice service," she said. "Short and simple."

"Did you hear anything about how he died?"

"A car accident, someone said."

"Hit-and-run. He was crossing the street outside his house."

"How terrible! Even a small town like this isn't safe from it."

"I think there was something odd about his death, Sara."

"In what way?"

"I think the sheriff knows who was driving that car. But

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for some reason he's not doing anything about it."

She smiled at his words. "Perhaps you're just too much of a detective."

"Maybe."

"You see things where there's nothing to be seen."

He ate his lunch in glum silence after that, wondering if she could be right.

The others had gathered back at the Leopold home, in the post-funeral tradition, and Leopold and Sara joined them shortly after lunch. Sheriff Potter was there, all boyish charm, chatting with an older woman on the front porch as he sipped beer from a glass.

"Good to see you again, Leopold. Thought you might have started back before I could say goodbye."

"No, I'm still here."

The older women took Sara in tow and they disappeared into the house. Leopold and Sheriff Potter were left alone on the porch. "I think Margaret's taking it quite good," the sheriff remarked. "At least she has her son to take care of her."

"Tell me about Henry Cole. He said he lives out on Creek Road."

"That's right. Got a nice place out there. Henry's a druggist in town. Owns his own store and works hard at it every day."

"I've been driving his car around." He glanced out at the car and for the first time he noticed a dent in the front bumper where the sunlight was hitting it. He made a mental note to examine it more closely later.

"It's been sort of the family vehicle since your uncle lost his license. Margaret never did drive."

"How did he lose his license?"

"It happened last year. He went off the road at a curve and hit a fruit stand. No one was hurt and it was sort of funny, really. But he'd had some other minor accidents before that and his age was against him. The state revoked his license. So since then Henry's been driving them around."

But Leopold was only half listening to the words. He was staring across the street. Suddenly he said, "Sheriff, tell me what you see over there."

"See? What do you mean? Can't you see for yourself?"

"I want to know what you see."

"A house. A couple of vacant lots."

"What else? Tell me everything."

"Two lamp posts. A fire hydrant. A Rotary Club sign."

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"What else?"

"Nothing else. What are you talking about?"

"Maybe nothing," Leopold said. He left the porch and went down the front walk to the street. Finally he came back onto the porch. "You mentioned the kids in the next county. What made you suspect them?"

Sheriff Potter shifted uneasily. "Are you back on that again?"

"If I can't get the answer from you, I'll get it from the sheriff over there."

"All right," he said with a sigh. "There was a hit-and-run death over in Sedgeville the same day Joe Leopold got it. Probably just coincidence; but I guess I figured the same wild driver did them both."

"Who was killed in Sedgeville?"

"A kid. I don't know any more about it."

Sara reappeared on the porch with Margaret Leopold. "Margaret's going to show me the garden. Want to come?"

"Sure," he agreed, glancing at the sheriff.

"You people go ahead," Potter said. "I have to get back to the office anyway. These summer weekends really bring out the drivers."

Leopold sensed that Potter was anxious to escape his questions. He followed the two women into the back yard, watching while the white-haired Margaret pulled a carrot from the earth and offered it for his inspection. "This garden was always Joe's pride," she said, a sadness in her voice. "I don't know how I'll be able to keep it up without him."

Leopold looked down the rows of flowers, past the leafy vegetables and the cornstalks that reached to his head. He remembered the garden from the days of his youth. It had always been here, always the same yet always changing. Reborn each spring.

"I must be going," Sara told the white-haired woman. "I only drove down for the funeral."

Margaret cut a few flowers and handed them to her. "I'm a widow now, like you. I hope I can be as brave as you've been."

Sara took the flowers and looked away. "I must be going," she said again.

Leopold fell into step beside her. "I'll walk you to the car."

"I was never any good at funerals," she said when they were out of Margaret's hearing. "That's why I wouldn't come back for lunch. I never know the right thing to say."

"Do any of us?" Leopold asked. "I spend my life on the

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other side. I'm usually concerned with who did it, but not who it happened to."

"That sounds like you think he was murdered."

"The word hasn't been mentioned."

"Are you flying back today?"

Leopold stared at the sky, debating. "First I'm going to visit another bereaved family," he decided. "Over in Sedgeville."

The Flynn house was quiet when he reached it, still driving the borrowed car. It sat subdued in the sunshine of a Saturday afternoon, an island of tranquillity unbothered by the shouting children at a ball game just down the street.

Leopold mounted the porch and knocked gently on the screen door, seeing that the front door stood open to the warmth of the day. After a moment a gaunt middle-aged woman appeared and spoke to him through the screen. "Yes?"

"I read in the papers about the accident to your son."

"The funeral was yesterday. Who are you?"

"My name is Leopold. I was visiting over in Riger Falls. Could I come in for a moment?"

"No. My husband isn't here. I'm alone."

"Certainly," he said. "I just wanted to ask a few questions about the accident. It happened on Tuesday, I believe."

"Yes."

"Here, near the house?"

She nodded. "Right in front. He was running across the street to mail a letter for me, and of course he didn't look where he was going. He never looked." Her eyes were staring past him, seeing it again. "Who are you?"

"Did the driver stop?"

"He slammed on his brakes, but it was too late. When he saw he'd hit him, he kept on going."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Flynn."

Her eyes refocused on his face. "It was you, wasn't it? You killed him and now you've come back!"

"No, it wasn't me. Goodbye. I'm sorry."

As he retreated from the porch she opened the screen door and started after him. "It *was* you! I remember that car!"

He opened his wallet and showed her the badge. "I'm investigating the case." That stopped her and she stood looking at him uncertainly, squinting with the afternoon sun in her eyes. "Now what about the car?" he asked.

"It was like yours. I saw it going away down the street. It was the same color."

"I see."

"Is it the same car?"

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Leopold looked out at the little beige sedan by the curb. "I don't know," he answered truthfully.

On the way back to Riger Falls he pulled off the road under a stand of leafy maple trees and parked. He got out of the car and went around to the front of it, kneeling in the dirt to examine the dented bumper. He could see now that the dent extended into the chrome grillework as well, and that it was recent. The exposed metal had not yet begun to rust.

While he was still on his knees studying it, another vehicle went by and slowed down, coming to a stop about 50 feet ahead. It was a hearse, and Jerry Raznell got out from the driver's side. "What's the matter?" he called. "Have a breakdown?"

Leopold got to his feet, brushing the dirt from his knees. "No, it's okay. I was just looking at the front of the car."

Raznell walked up to him and glanced down at the dented front end. "Did you have an accident?"

"No. It was like that."

"Henry Cole's car, isn't it?"

"Yes."

The undertaker grunted. "What are you going to do about it?" he asked.

Leopold met his eyes and something passed between them, something from the old days when they had been friends. "What do you think I should do?"

"Did you talk to the sheriff?"

"He told me nothing."

"He must have told you something. You were on your way back from Sedgeville."

"Yes," Leopold admitted. "He told me that much."

"Where you heading now?"

"I guess I'll take the car back to Henry Cole." He was staring down at the dented front end. "What do you think he ran into?"

Jerry Raznell shrugged. "A tree. A small tree."

"Or a small boy? Or an old man?"

"You really think that?"

"Don't you?"

"No."

"Mrs. Flynn recognized the car."

"Who's Mrs. Flynn?"

"I found her name in the paper. Her son was killed by a hit-and-run driver on Tuesday."

"The same day Joe Leopold was hit."

"That's right. Jerry, why are we talking in circles? We were friends once. Good friends."

"You should be heading back home soon."

"I am home, Jerry. This is my home. I came back."

"But only for the day, only

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for the funeral. The rest of us have to stay here after you're gone."

Leopold turned and walked around to the car door. "I'm going to see Henry Cole," he said.

As he pulled away, Jerry Raznell was still standing by the side of the road. In his rearview mirror Leopold saw him start slowly back toward his hearse.

Henry Cole, the stoop-shouldered druggist, was still at the Leopold house when he pulled up. "I brought your car back in one piece," he said, greeting the man in the front yard.

"Sure did. But I wasn't worried."

"I don't want you to think I put that dent in the front end of your car."

"No, I wouldn't think that. Did it myself last week."

"How'd it happen?"

The man glanced away, obviously nervous. "I—I bumped into another car."

"No."

"What?"

"No," Leopold said. "That's not the way it happened. Do you want to tell me the truth now?"

"I gotta be going," he said quickly. He snatched the keys from Leopold's hand and hurried to the car.

Margaret Leopold came out to the porch. "Why'd he leave in such a hurry?"

"I asked him a question he wouldn't answer," Leopold said.

The others had all departed and the house was empty now, except for the two of them. "What question was that?"

"How the front of his car got dented."

"Come up here on the porch, where we can talk. It's been a long day for me."

"A long day for all of us," Leopold conceded. He chose a wicker chair opposite her and sat down. "My cousin Sara says I'm too much of a detective, that I see things where there's nothing to be seen."

"And do you?"

Leopold shook his head. "Quite the opposite, really. I don't see things where there is something to be seen."

"What don't you see?"

"The mailbox across the street."

"What?" Her forehead creased with wrinkles. "What do you mean?"

"I stood out here this afternoon and asked Sheriff Potter everything he saw across the street and he told me. There's no mailbox. I went out to the street and looked both ways, and there was still no mailbox. And yet you told your son Henry that Uncle Joe was cross-

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ing the street to mail a letter."

"I—"

"It's a very odd lie, really, because anyone around here looking across the street would see there's no mailbox over there. I thought about that a long time, and then this afternoon Sheriff Potter mentioned another hit-and-run accident in Sedgeville the same day. I drove over there and saw the mother of the boy who was killed—Mrs. Flynn."

Her face had gone white as chalk. Her hands gripped the wicker arms of the chair. "You saw her?"

Leopold nodded. "She told me her son was running across the street to mail a letter, and then of course I was pretty sure what happened. The driver of the car slammed on the brakes, but too late. There must have been an image there in the driver's eyes of a boy darting off the curb, clutching an envelope in his hand. And he told that to you, didn't he? His image became your image, and when it came time to tell about Uncle Joe's accident, you used those same words. Letter in hand, crossing the street."

"You know it all, don't you?"

"I know it all. The recent dent in the bumper, Mrs. Flynn's description of the car. And both accidents the same day. It couldn't be coincidence. I only had to ask myself who was driving that day. Your son Henry would have been working at the drug store, and even if he hadn't been—could we imagine him lending me his car knowing what had caused that dent? No, not Henry. And not you, of course, because you never drove. And that only left one person, didn't it?"

She stared out at the trees, and at the evening sun caught in their branches. "Yes," she answered after a while. "It was your Uncle Joe who killed the boy."

"Tell me about it, Margaret," he said quietly.

"There's not much to tell, not really. He wanted to go over to Sedgeville to look at some antiques he'd seen advertised. You know how he was about woodworking and fine old furniture. Well, Henry was busy at the drug store and couldn't take him. But the car was here as it often was, and Joe decided to drive over there himself. He'd driven a few times since losing his license, but never as far as that. I was sick about it, but he went anyway. When he came back—" Her voice broke and Leopold put out a hand to steady her.

"Go on," he urged.

"When he came back he looked horrible. He was bleed-

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ing from the mouth and his clothes were covered with spots of blood. He said he'd hit a boy who was crossing the street to mail a letter. He'd slammed on the brakes at the last moment, and injured his own chin and mouth on the steering wheel. But then he'd panicked and kept on going, because he was driving without a license. I guess it was all that blood gave me the idea for another hit-and-run accident in front of our house. I had to protect him somehow."

"So you called for an ambulance and they took him to the hospital."

She nodded. "They said he wasn't hurt bad, but the shock of what he'd done had set in. I had to get him away. I told Henry some lie about the bumper and he never questioned it, never connected it with the accident in the next county."

"Sheriff Potter knew," Leopold said.

"Oh, yes. He's a smart young man. He knew. The Sedgeville police contacted him, of course, and he had a description of the car. He talked to the doctors at the hospital about the nature of Joe's injuries, and he guessed what had happened. He told me he would have to arrest Joe."

"And he would have, if Uncle Joe hadn't died first."

"Yes." She looked away perhaps toward the garden in the back yard, and her firm hands tightened on the wicker chair. "I got to the hospital ahead of the sheriff to warn Joe. But they'd given him a sedative and he was sleeping He just—never woke up."

It was almost dark, and Leopold had to be getting back Perhaps he could still catch the bus to the airport and a night flight home.

He stood up and said, "I must be going. There's nothing more for me here."

"No. It was good of you to come."

He paused at the steps. "Potter isn't the only one who knows. Jerry Raznell knows too."

She nodded. "Jerry uses the hearse as an ambulance. He took Joe to the hospital after—after I said the car hit him. He was suspicious then. think he talked to the sheriff."

She seemed suddenly old to his eyes, older than yesterday when he'd come to Riger Falls "I suppose it's a blessing thi way," Leopold said. "At his age the trial would have killed him Or just the publicity, even if i never got to trial."

"I know," she said. "I though of that, too."

He kissed her lightly on th cheek and went down the step

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without looking back. He did not ask the meaning of her last words, because he knew. Now, remembering Jerry Raznell's suspicions, remembering his uncle's sudden death from those minor mouth injuries, remembering most of all her firm hands and the way they tightened on the chair, he knew there was one question he could never ask Margaret Leopold.

He could never ask her if, alone with Uncle Joe in that hospital room, she'd held a pillow over his sleeping face until the life drained from his old body, just minutes before Sheriff Potter arrived to arrest him.

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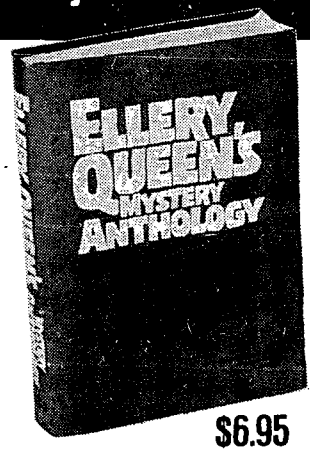

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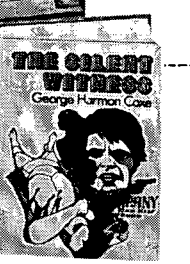

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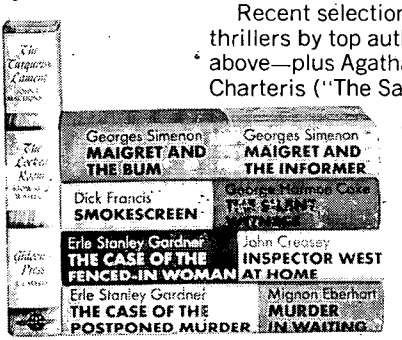

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